

SHIDEN KANZAKI

神崎 紫 電

Illustration

鵜飼沙樹



[黒の銃弾]

天
逃亡犯、里見蓮太郎

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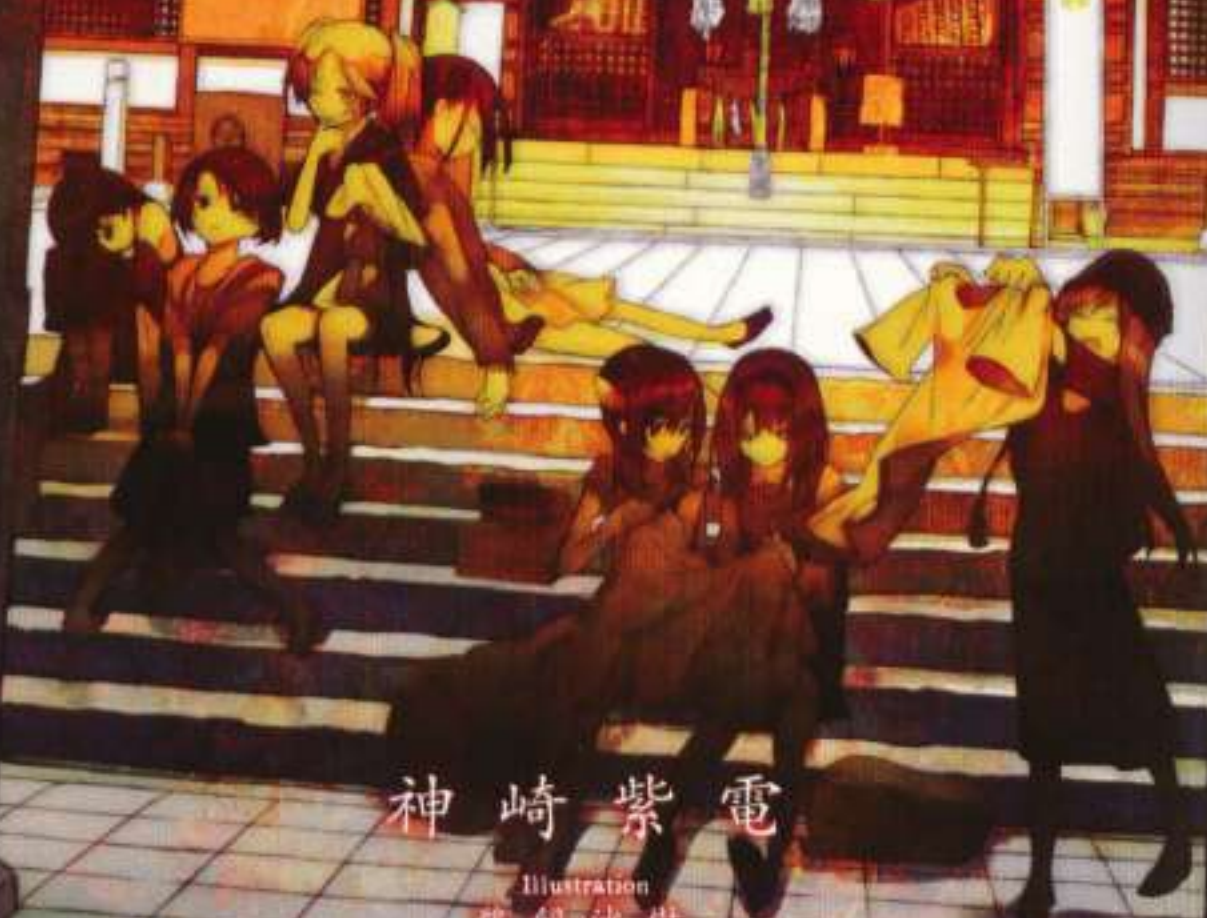
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[黒の銃弾]

ブラックバレット

逃亡犯 里見 蓮太郎

5



神崎紫電

Illustration
稿 飼沙樹

「……まさか、これだけなんですか？
今日の「飯、たうた」これだけなんですか？」

「さあみんな、いただきますするわよ」

「……イモだろ？ サツモイモ。
ヒルガオ科のつる性の多年草」



俺は、木更さんにどうして欲しいんだ？
俺は……。

A manga-style illustration. In the foreground, a girl with long, straight purple hair and light blue eyes looks directly at the viewer with a neutral expression. She is wearing a light blue high-collared shirt under a dark purple dress. In the background, a boy with short, dark hair and a dark suit is seen from the side, looking back over his shoulder. He is standing on a rooftop with a tiled surface. The scene is lit with soft, warm light, suggesting dusk or dawn.

「紅露火垂……だったか。
水原のイニシエーターだな」

「私が誰だかわかる？」

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BLACK BULLET 5



ブラック・ブレット [黒の銃弾]

逃亡犯、里見蓮太郎

5

SHIDEN KANZAKI

神崎紫電

ILLUSTRATION

鶴飼沙樹

SAKI UKAI

Black Bullet Volume 5

written by Shiden Kanzaki (神崎紫電)

illustrated by Saki Ukai (鵜飼沙樹)

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Prologue - Fomenting Nightmare

The soprano's beautiful voice was exhibiting her broad vocal range, varying between high and low notes that permeated gently throughout the vast theater.

Kenji Houbara was sitting in the dimly lit audience area, holding his breath while staring at the stage intently.

Dressed in seventeenth-century Scottish attire, the actors sang the prose-like lyrics in recitative style while walking back and forth across the stage.

The electronic screen on the side of the stage lit up suddenly to display what they were singing about. The tense atmosphere on stage was transmitted directly to the audience as though one could almost see taut wires.

Kenji was watching the opera called *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti.

Lucia Ashton and Edgardo di Ravenswood were in love and attempted to act as bridge of amity between the two feuding families. However, Lucia's elder brother hated the Ravenswood family and forged a breakup letter, thereby destroying the couple's relationship and forcing his sister to agree to be used for a political marriage with a rich noble.

Nevertheless, upon hearing that Lucia was suddenly and inexplicably about to marry someone else, Edgar appeared at the wedding in a mad fit of rage to denounce Lucia harshly.

The psychological blow drove Lucia insane.

After stabbing the groom to death, Lucia chose death in the end. Realizing the truth, Edgar followed her by committing suicide...

On the subject of classical operas, Kenji would recommend Mozart without a second thought but Donizetti—or rather, *Lucia di Lammermoor*—stood as the single exception.

Even though he had watched this play countless times and the plot was already branded in his brain, Kenji still reported to the opera house every time like this.

On further thought, it dawned upon Kenji that timeless operas passed down the ages were tragedies more often than not.

What looked like unyielding love on the surface could be sent on path towards destruction with only the slightest opening of jealousy and suspicion...

Kenji knew it would be impolite behavior, but he still looked around at the audience sitting beside and behind him, feeling very sorrowful inside.

New National Theater's one thousand and eight hundred seats were filled less than thirty percent, but looking at it a different way, this was actually very reasonable. With so many talented individuals lost forever to the Gastrea War ten years ago, this phenomenon was not limited to just the movie industry.

Suddenly sensing someone quietly take a seat behind him, Kenji found a sweet fragrance entering his nostrils.

Silently, Kenji felt surprised. The girl was probably a middle schooler. Her face was hidden beneath a straw hat while her flat chest was clad in a one-piece dress that seemed as sheer as a silk curtain. Most striking of all was the pink teddy bear held in her hand.

With so many empty seats around, why did she pick one next to him?

At this moment, the sound of the orchestra entered his ear with a series of low-register notes akin to forceful banging. The unsettling accompaniment brought forth Lucia's "Mad Scene" aria.

By the time Kenji noticed, it was already Act 3.

Having stabbed the groom to death in a frenzy, all covered in blood and at a loss, Lucia emerged from the right side of the stage to arrive at the wedding banquet and started to sing a terrifying aria filled with madness with the bloodstained blade still in her hand...

Kenji suddenly felt an impact on his chest as intense pain pierced his entire body.

As soon as he felt something disgusting surge from the depths of his stomach, he started to vomit blood violently.

Looking at his chest, he unbelievably found a knife embedded there.

He could not comprehend what had happened.

Turning his neck slowly, he saw that the knife was wielded by the girl in the straw hat who had been sitting next to him. The murder weapon had apparently been hidden beforehand in the teddy bear. Thrust horizontally, the knife had slid cleanly between Kenji's ribs, piercing the heart to destroy it.

"Wh... Wh..."

—Why?

Just as he wanted to ask, Kenji suddenly found his mouth covered as the girl drew her face near.

Holding an index finger to her lips to make a "shhh" sound, the girl was making a cute expression as though she were warning others to refrain from breaching audience etiquette.

As his consciousness faded away, Kenji could not even utter a groan and thus he lost his life with his head hung quietly in this manner.

The girl's gaze was fixated on the opera ahead. Meanwhile, she firmly held the hand of the man beside her, confirming the total disappearance of the pulse before she got up.

The performance on stage had reached the end of the third act. While listening to the orchestra's solemn performance, the girl left the theater.

The instant she stepped out of the air-conditioned theater, the girl was confronted with piercing sunlight and stuffy summer air. Under the hot air, the scorching asphalt seemed to waver in sight.

While operating her cellphone, the girl called a predetermined number.

"This is Hummingbird. Mission Accomplished. Awaiting further instructions, Nest."

Saya Takamura's early morning responsibilities started with rousing her husband and son from slumber.

Climbing the creaking stairs of oak, she entered in succession the adjoining rooms of her son's and husband's.

Shaking these experienced oversleepers once or twice would not be enough to rouse them from bed, so there was a trick to waking them up. Saya would pull off their blankets and leave the doors open then let them be. Then she went downstairs to make breakfast. Attracted by the aroma, her husband and son would rise from bed slowly like zombies. That was her technique.

Despite a lack of resemblance in facial appearance between father and son, one would exclaim "like father, like son" based on this habit of theirs.

Shredding cheese slices to make a cheese omelette, she spread the previous day's leftover mincemeat curry onto toast.

After watching the two finish their breakfast at a leisurely rate, she then sent her husband off to work with a packed lunch of salmon rice balls while seeing her son leave on the kindergarten school bus.

Next came the real battle.

Tying her apron behind her vigorously to muster morale, she checked the weather report while throwing the accumulated dirty clothing into the washing machine and pressing the start button, finally putting on rubber gloves.

She had already resolved herself today to take care of the stains between the bathroom tiles that she usually avoided, as well as cleaning the area around the toilet.

What she expected to be a tough mold-removal process turned out to go unexpectedly smoothly thanks to the use of high temperature for stain removal.

While spraying detergent and scrubbing the gaps between tiles forcefully, Saya felt incomparable joy surging in her heart.

She was taking care of her husband and son as a matter of fact, doing house chores as a matter of fact.

Right in front of her was a happy scene that she dared not imagine ten years ago.

Hearing the sound of the washing machine finishing its load, she stood up in the bathroom. Carrying the clean laundry in her arms, she pushed the sliding door open with her foot and came to the veranda.

The sky's color was beautiful beyond description while cumulus clouds drifted past noiselessly. The sun was giving off bright rays.

Just at this moment, she heard the faint sound of the doorbell from inside the house. Putting down the laundry basket hastily, Saya ran over to the front door while wiping her hands on her apron.

"CO—MING!"

Saya was rooted to the spot in surprise after opening the door.

Standing there was a man who gave off a particularly threatening presence. Standing over 190cm tall, he was dressed in a trenchcoat despite the summer weather, wearing a pair of round sunglasses with a short, neatly trimmed beard around his mouth.

Clearly not a pleasant customer.

"Umm..."

"Are you Saya Takamura?"

The man spoke in monotone while throwing numerous pieces of paper at Saya, which scattered on the ground.

Saya hastily put up a defensive stance, but upon further examination, those were simply dozens of printed photographs.

All of them depicted Saya. Only then did she realize she had been photographed in secret.

"——!"

The instant she realized what these photos implied, Saya reached into her apron's pocket to draw out a Glock pistol.

Then in the next second, Saya's back struck the wall violently behind her, accompanied by the sound of gunshot.

"Guh..."

The man had started holding a shotgun at some point, with hot white smoke drifting from its muzzle. For ease of concealment, this was a compact weapon made by shortening the barrel and the stock.

Saya pressed her hand against her abdomen. The anti-personnel shell had mercilessly torn her abdomen apart, resulting in a critical wound.

Saya's Glock fell on the ground. Looking up, she asked:

"Who on earth... are you?"

She was answered with a shotgun muzzle aimed at the center of her forehead.

Pressing the shotgun's trigger, the man followed up with a second shot.

Ignoring Saya who lay collapsed on the ground with a trail of blood along the wall, he concealed his shotgun in his coat and swiftly departed from the house.

As soon as he left the front door, neighbors were already poking their heads out one after another due to hearing the gunfire.

Only after making sure he was at a safe location did the man start operating his cellphone.

"This is Swordtail. Please respond, Nest. Mission accomplished, awaiting further instructions."

"By the way, speaking of yesterday's gathering, I can't believe those men suggested splitting the bill at the last minute when clearly they were more than ten years older than us. Totally unreasonable."

Gyahaha, kyahaha—laughter erupted from the others. Crude laughter was leaking out of the classroom's open window, resounding throughout the school.

There was a disgusting smell of perfume. Clearly a mistake in dosage, opting for excess rather than not enough—Yuuga Mitsugi suddenly realized what the first person who coined these words was trying to convey.

Things had become very troublesome—Yuuga was thinking in a corner of his mind but he soon shook his head and walked over to his seat.

"Hey."

"Huh?"

He looked back to see one of the top delinquent girls in the class. Despite wearing Nukagari High's second-year summer uniform, her attire was deliberately sloppy. Insisting she was born with such hair to the teacher, there was a layer dyed with blonde highlights. Putting on earrings whenever the bell rang for the end of class then taking them off when class started, she always acted nonchalantly in front of the teachers. This type of delinquent girl was truly troublesome.

Yuuga recalled her name was Yoshiko Kamuro. Whenever she spotted a girl in the same year group who rubbed her the wrong way, she would gather a group to surround the hapless victim and take her to a washroom for "punishment." How ludicrous it was for such a villainous girl to be called Yoshiko when "yoshi" meant "good."

"That's my spot."

"So what?"

Yoshiko's fat ass was sitting on Yuuga's desk, swaying her legs while she retorted to Yuuga.

"Could you please leave? I can't get my textbooks like this."

These words instantly froze the air in the classroom. Surrounding her, the boys and girls were looking over in their direction with eyes filled with hostility.

Yoshiko was also glaring silently at Yuuga when she suddenly moved her bottom halfway but did not do anything else. This appeared to be the greatest compromise she was willing to make.

Despite feeling quite troubled, Yuuga still took out the books and notes he needed for the next classroom. Since this was his own seat, saying thanks would be weird, so he left silently.

"You're dead meat, Mitsugi bro."

Yuuga arrived at his friend Shingo Kuromatsu's seat, only to find Kuromatsu waving in surprise to welcome him.

"What's wrong?"

"You're even asking me what's wrong...?"

Kuromatsu instantly made a surprised face but soon sighed in exasperation:

"Mitsugi bro, it's already been three months since you transferred here, so we're supposed to be friends, right? That's why I advised you to work hard to fit in at school. It's impossible for me to imagine what kind of life you led at Seishin High previously."

"..."

Then what was the correct response for the situation just now?

After all, Yuuga had tried hard to act like an ordinary student but people always found his behavior to be abnormal.

Even if Yuuga told this well-intentioned friend that he only enrolled at Seishin High in name only without actually attending a single day of school, it would probably be of no help.

Furthermore, the three months Yuuga had spent after transferring to this school were also for the sake of carrying out today's mission.

"Mitsugi bro, I hope you won't get mad at me for saying this, but sometimes I feel very distant from you. It's like you're an alien from another planet who's living among us..."

"That's really sharp of you."

"Huh?"

Yuuga smiled cheerfully at his wide-eyed friend.

"Just kidding."

Yuuga's cellphone rang.

It's here?

Yuuga shoved his biology textbook at Kuromatsu's chest.

"Sorry, Kuromatsu bro, but could you head over to next period's classroom first?"

"Eh? S-Sure thing..."

Before he could finish listening to Kuromatsu's answer, Yuuga turned around and left the classroom. Passing by many rows of classrooms to enter a staff washroom where there was no one else, he hung a wireless handsfree ear-mic on his ear and tapped his smartphone.

"Hey, Darkstalker here."

'Bad news. I just received information that the target has taken the bullet train one earlier than expected.'

Yuuga moved his brow lightly and looked at his watch.

"How many minutes ago did that happen?"

'Twenty-five minutes. There are less than five minutes before the train will pass by that point. Head over immediately to the appointed location.'

Yuuga understood without needing further explanation.

Rushing out of the washroom stall, Yuuga charged up the stairs next to the staff prep room, making swift turns by holding on to the handrails for support. Within the blink of an eye, he had already arrived at the locked door leading to the roof. Inserting the key he had obtained beforehand, he opened the iron door.

Despite a special note of "congenital frailty in health" on his transfer application, Yuuga had run almost fifty meters without any loss of breath or reddening in his cheeks.

The bell happened to ring for the start of class and students downstairs could be heard running frantically.

The door opened with the grating of the hinges as dazzling sunlight and a clear blue sky came into view.

Exiting the door and circling behind the water tank, Yuuga took out a long narrow attache case from the gap between the water tank and roof's guard rails. This also needed a key to unlock.

A rifle appeared at the same time as the fragrance of gun oil.

This was a DSR-1 sniper rifle manufactured by AMP Technical Services.

With the action and magazine located further back than ordinary guns, thereby shortening the gun's total length while maintaining a certain level of accuracy, this was a bull-pup bolt-action sniper rifle.

Using .338 Lapua Magnum bullets, the front of the barrel had the flash hider replaced by a silencer, thereby reducing the noise and muzzle flash generated by firing. A perfect specimen of functional beauty unencumbered by entrenched traditions in sniper rifle design.

It was probably time for class to start. Grandiose music was being played in the music room downstairs, producing bass notes that were enough to shake one's abdominal cavity. It was *Ode to Joy* set to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Yuuga checked the time. Two minutes remaining.

With fluid motions, Yuuga took up a prone sniping posture, aiming the muzzle at the bullet train railway passing through the undulating hilly landscape opposite the school building. Opening the flip-over cover on the optical scope, he folded out the bipod from the barrel jacket. Keeping the muzzle aimed at the railway, he extended the monopod from the shoulder stock to rest on the ground, resulting in three-point contact to further stabilize the gun.

Taking the box magazine from the spare magazine holder in front, he inserted it under the action and operated the bolt handle to chamber the first round. Putting his eye near the scope, he could see various readings such as wind speed and shooting angle.

The scope lens was Carl Zeiss AG's latest model from the year 2031, featuring ballistics calculating functions that presented all kinds of ballistics data within the field of view at a glance.

The target distance was 1200m. Calibration was already performed according to standard procedure.

'Thirty seconds left, it's coming!'

The voice on the line was unable to suppress the anxiety the speaker was trying to conceal. However, Yuuga's mind was as serene as a lake surface with only a mild breeze blowing.

The surrounding noise gradually grew smaller while his own heartbeat sounded especially loud.

Adjusting his breathing several times, he placed his finger on the trigger and released the safety.

—Then he released the power in his prosthetic eyes.

Geometric patterns appeared on both of Yuuga's eyes as the installed CPUs activated inside the eyeballs of black, then they started to turn.

His thought frequency was amplified several hundred fold, allowing the surrounding flow of time to become akin to slow motion in his field of vision.

Beethoven's symphony turned into meaningless low humming while the sun's brightness went down by two grades roughly.

The movement of all creation slowed down and even the eagle flying across the corner of his eye seemed so slow that it was about to stop.

On the right side of his view, the bullet train could be seen approaching sluggishly.

In the bullet train, which was originally supposed to pass by in a flash, even every passenger's teeth could be seen clearly.

According to prior reports, the target was meant to sit at a predetermined seat next to the twenty-fifth window counting from the front, but naturally, the seating had changed now that an earlier train was taken.

—Found him.

Next the twelfth window counting from the front, there was a slightly bald man with an expensive cigar in his mouth and an impatient expression on his face. Exactly the same as confirmed from photographs.

The prosthetic eyes' calculations finished, producing a formula for a guaranteed hit.

Yuuga narrowed his eyes and pulled the trigger with murderous intent from his entire body. The trigger spring gave an elastic sensation. He pulled the trigger all the way back in one breath.

Connected to the bolt action inside, the firing pin struck the primer at the bottom of the cartridge, firing the bullet.

A small explosion resulted inside the action, producing suppressed muzzle flash from the front of the silencer. At the same time, passing through the rifling inside the barrel, the Lapua Magnum bullet was spinning in a spiral manner as it tore through the atmosphere, advancing towards the target.

Yuuga could feel the heavy recoil transmit slowly to his shoulder.

Inside this world where everything was flowing slowly, only the bullet seemed exceptionally fast. Continued calculations predicted the bullet's momentum to enter the bullet train's window, breaking the glass, piercing the target's head from the side. Keeling over slowly, the target would collapse on the spot.



Convinced that there was no need to watch any longer, Yuuga reduced his thinking speed and allowed the flow of time to return to normal.

Ode to Joy's melody instantly flooded his ears like an explosion while the lingering recoil stung his firing shoulder. The sun's brightness had also recovered before he knew it.

Watching the bullet train pass through the raised track with fierce speed, Yuuga stood up and stared out into the blue sky with his head cocked.

'Taken out?'

"I think so."

Already suppressed, the sound of the gunshot was cleverly covered up by *Ode to Joy* and the noise of the bullet train passing through.

Yuuga sighed:

"Well then, Nest. Mission accomplished, Darkstalker awaiting further instructions—"

"—J-Just now...? What was that?"

As though feeling an electric shock, Yuuga looked back to see a classmate standing there in shock with eyes of disbelief.

Yoshiko Kamuro.

As for why she would suddenly appear here, Yuuga looked behind her. The roof's iron door was ajar, instantly prompting him to understand.

Even when time did not allow for any hesitation, neglecting to lock the door was still quite shameful of him.

Skipping class, Yoshiko had discovered that the roof's door was unlocked and came up here, thinking she was lucky—She totally did not expect this move to cost her life.

"You saw it."

Yuuga said lightly and took a step towards Yoshiko, causing her to take a step back.

"Th-That thing looks like a gun, that's fucking cool."

She forced herself to bluff and smile. At least, were she able to suppress the shaking of her legs, it would look more convincing.

Yuuga walked over to her silently and Yoshiko kept backing away.

But soon she was cornered, forced against the metal railing.

"Are you a hitman?"

"No, I'm an avenger."

Yuuga shrugged and looked up into the sky.

"Regrettably, this project would be ruined if I let you live. I'm very sorry to say something like this to you whom I've known for three months here—Die."

Without any warning or preparatory motion, Yuuga performed a palm strike. The instant he hit her chest, a massive depression appeared along with the sound of the chest getting crushed.

This was an attack designed for wrecking the human body using anatomy calculations. Breaking the ribs through the chest muscles at the perfect angle of impact zero, those broken ribs were then used to pierce the heart, producing death on the spot.

During the circulation of blood of the heart's final and forceful beat, what was she thinking? Surely she must be unable to understand the meaning of the legs that were going limp against her own will as well as the fresh blood flowing out from the corner of her lips.

Picking up the collapsed body, Yuuga spoke to the ear-mic:

"Sorry, Nest, I'm placing an unplanned corpse in the storage cupboard in the staircase. Please retrieve it before the students on cleaning duty discover it after school."

"Why you bastard, every single time—"

Yuuga hung up without hearing the rest.

Laying down the girl who was gradually turning into a cold stiff corpse, Yuuga looked out at the scenery from the roof of Nukagari High.

The blowing summer breeze struck him in the face as Yuuga looked at his palms intently:

"Why am I a failure despite being so powerful? ——
Professor."

Chapter 1 - Rentaro the Fugitive

Part 1

In the depths of the optically magnified view, the monster's figure could be captured. Currently scaling a virtually vertical surface, the Gastrea specimen looked like a crustacean with octopus appendages at first glance.

Those appendages, covered with numerous suction cups, could undoubtedly be categorized as the pereopods of invertebrates. However, their base—in other words, the main body—was covered by a hard shell like a helmet.

Due to the head fusing with the thorax into a cephalothorax, it was not possible to discern where the brain and eyes were located. The body traced out gentle curves from its flat back, increasingly narrowing as it extended out to a tail with a long and sharp spike at the end.

Using its tentacles and arms, the Gastrea climbed a step vertically up the building. Satomi Rentaro felt nervousness rush across his entire body.

Under the intense rays of the midday sun, large beads of sweat were sliding down his face from his eyebrows.

The chirping of cicadas was very annoying and the unbearably harsh summer was almost making his skin catch on fire.

Amidst this environment, Rentaro was locked in a tough struggle against another type of Gastrea.

The building that the Gastrea was ascending was the Tokyo Tower with its prided steel skeleton of red.

"Big Brother, there is wind blowing from six o'clock at 10-13 kilometers per hour."

Rentaro looked up from the sniper rifle's installed scope towards the voice. The blonde girl who was taking prone shooting position next to him was showing a serious expression.

With sniper rifle carefully against her shoulder just like Rentaro, this girl was named Tina Sprout.

Without looking at him, she was aiming at the same target as Rentaro using an optical scope.

Interspersed regularly between her and the target Gastrea were hovering black spheres.

That was the thought-driven interface known as "Shenfield," like observation buoys floating out at sea, they were able to wirelessly transmit to her brain various data essential to sniping such as wind speed.

Rentaro and Tina were stationed on the roof a building near the Tokyo Tower.

Even with the wet towel draped over his head, the intense sunlight from above was making Rentaro feel as though he were lying on a frying pan.

While wiping the constant sweat, he fought against the hot air that was enough to distort the imagery.

Nevertheless, even on a bright and sunny day, there was no bustling around the Tokyo Tower. Neither were there kids playing or old people napping.

That was only natural because the area was currently sealed off by the police. The Tokyo Tower's vicinity was packed full of police cars while officers kept shotguns aimed upwards without lowering their guard.

However, they did not look like they were going to make a move. Given the sky-high death rate of police officers in Gastrea crimes, civil security companies had sprung up in the niche between the police and the SDF to handle Gastrea cases.

The first to arrive on scene were Rentaro and Tina who were responsible for sniping to eliminate the Gastrea adhering to the Tokyo Tower.

Rentaro pressed his eye tightly against the optical scope.

The distance to the Gastrea was almost 100m.

This kind of distance did not pose any problem to average snipers. Also, the wind was very mild and such wind speeds had virtually negligible effect on bullets.

However, the Rentaro's view through the optical scope was shaking violently, making him miss many opportunities to pull the trigger. Unable to act as intended, Rentaro was losing his ability to think calmly.

"Big Brother!"

Urged by this cry, Rentaro pulled the trigger in resignation.

Powerful recoil was felt on his shoulder. However, the varanium bullet flew to the upper right of the Gastrea adhered to the Tokyo Tower, shooting into the steel material with a crisp sound.

Without giving Rentaro the chance to gnash his teeth in chagrin, the Gastrea heightened its alert and split open its cephalothorax to extend the wings kept inside.

—Crap, it's gonna fly away.

Operating the manual gun, Rentaro reloaded and swiftly shot again, but still missed a little. The bullet shot empty towards the Gastrea's former position before it flew away.

Trying to break the encirclement by flying, the Gastrea was making Rentaro's face go pale. With the quick sound of gunfire, a bullet pierced the Stage II Gastrea's cephalothorax while it was taking to the skies. The monster lost speed in midair and fell, crashing down violently to the ground.

The surrounding police officers instantly cheered.

Although it was not dead, the Gastrea was no longer capable of fighting thanks to varanium's ability to inhibit regeneration.

Rentaro looked up and to the side. Tina's Dragunov sniper rifle was giving off faint white smoke from its muzzle.

Tina had her eyes closed as though savoring the aftertaste of the sniping shot. Finally, she separated from the infra-red scope and wiping her sweat with a hand, she looked at Rentaro with a smile and said:

"Don't worry, Big Brother. Everyone starts out like this."

Rentaro hung his head in shame.

It would be too much of a show of weakness if he said something like Tina's kind words were making him feel even worse.

Apart from using Tendo-style combat arts, Rentaro was also a marksman.

Due to his partner Enju Aihara being an Initiator specializing in close quarters combat, he was quite confident in his ability to support her weaknesses in mid and long range combat.

He was okay in using handguns at mid range, but what about long range?

Due to feeling it was necessary, he had asked Tina to instruct him on this area. There were no problems so far, but perhaps regrettably, Rentaro did not find his rate of improvement quite ideal.

He shook his head and said:

"I guess I'm unable to stay focused while staring at the same spot all the time."

Just now, the tragedy of letting a Gastrea escape almost happened.

"Big Brother, why do you want to improve your sniping skills?"

Facing the stares of Tina's innocent green eyes, Rentaro deliberately avoided eye contact and answered:

"Because I feel it's necessary. I don't know why, but I always feel I must get stronger."

"That's the reason."

Tina pointed at herself:

"Big Brother, you're unable to articulate clearly into words the reason why you want to become stronger. That will generate hesitation when confronted with a shot."

"It's a psychological issue?"

Tina nodded silently.

"You should have noticed by now, right? What sniping is about."

Hearing words that poked him in a sore spot, Rentaro secretly lamented to himself.

I see, it's just as Tina said.

Although he already knew before practicing, shooting with a handgun was very different from sniping.

Apart from distance, sniping required ending the opponent's life before one was even noticed by the opponent. Bluntly stated, it was very hard to get away from the implication of murder.

Firing a gun when facing off against a hostile enemy was fine because even if death resulted, one could console oneself by the excuse of legitimate defense.

Sniping was different. Rentaro did not know what attitude to use for confronting the act of pulling the trigger as well as the entailed death.

Using Gastrea as targets was okay but Rentaro could not help but think: What if the target was a human, would he still be able to carry out the sniping procedure like during practice?

"Do you have that kind of resolve?"

The platinum blonde girl looked into his eyes and nodded.

"Sniping is the meaning of my existence. If I hadn't learned this skill and was unable to control Shenfield at will, Professor Rand would have branded me a failure eventually and disposed of me."

"Disposed of?"

"I've heard many rumors regarding the fates of the girls whose bodies failed to get accustomed to the mechanical parts, but the veracity cannot be confirmed. For me, salvation meant sealing away my imagination to avoid thinking about the future, to take things in stride and to make my body learn these abilities as quickly as possible. One must extinguish the soul in order to kill humans."

"That's not how a human lives."

Rentaro continued to say to Tina who had her head bowed in silence.

"You're asking me to pull the trigger mercilessly?"

"No. Big Brother, please find your own reason for taking away the opponent's life. I cannot assist in this search. Conversely, so long as you have not found the reason, you won't improve no matter how much you practice and you'd be better off giving up earlier on the skill of sniping."

This was probably a textbook example of being blunt.

Rentaro and Tina gazed into each other's eyes for quite a while. Hot wind blew across the roof, causing their hair to sway slightly.

Rentaro was the first to relax the corners of his mouth.

"My, how strict you are, Tina the Teacher."

Covered in sweat, Tina smiled again.

"Big Brother, you're usually the one teaching me things so I'm very glad that I can also teach you certain things now."

Picking up the Dragunov sniper rifle, Tina pointed down below:

"That Gastrea is still alive. Let's take care of it before it can harm the citizens."

Just at this moment, a triumphant cheer of "Finally took care of this bastard!" was heard, causing Rentaro and Tina to jump in fright and look towards the source.

Upon closer examination, there was a familiar CivSec pair at the bottom of the Tokyo Tower. Dressed in ostentatious punk-style, they were Tamaki Katagiri and Yuzuki Katagiri who had fought alongside Rentaro and company as comrades in the Third Kantō Battle.

They were jumping on top of the Gastrea that Tina had shot down. The Gastrea down there had clearly been taken out.

In other words—

Rentaro and Tina stared at each other and yelled at the same time:

"Our kill was stolen!"

Part 2

It was already mid August. Even in this current world where the population had been drastically reduced by the Gastrea War, the Earth was still troubled by serious global warming, with the most recent problems happening in the permafrost of originally cold regions. According to reports, the melting permafrost had liberated dead animal and plant matter that was originally dormant below, resulting in the subsequent release of methane from decomposition, causing great waves on the issue of accelerating global warming.

Although carbon emissions from humans were reduced greatly, the liabilities inherited from the past could possibly have tipped global warming beyond the point of no return already.

Even with the air-conditioning on at full blast in the office, it was impossible to counter the scorching heat outside at thirty-nine degrees centigrade. The chirping of cicadas sounded like screams.

But it was silent in the office with an atmosphere of subtle seriousness.

Tina, Enju and Rentaro were seated in sweat with indescribable facial expressions.

At dusk with the setting sun's rays streaming in at a slant, in a corner of the Tendo Civil Security Company's office, the sofa set matched with the glass table was meant for receiving guests but rarely did the furniture get a chance to serve their intended purpose.

Wearing an apron on top of her school uniform, Kisara Tendo passed through the curtain to emerge from the kitchen, bringing four plates to line up on the glass table at the guest sofas.

There was a plate in front of Rentaro too. The food in front of him was giving off a pungent sweet smell that irritated his nasal cavity while the hot steam smashed into his face. His stomach growled.

Finally arranging the plate by her side, Kisara finished preparations and took her seat, clapping her hands together and closing her eyes.

"Come, everyone. Shall we begin?"

Rentaro and Enju clapped and hastily answered "Let's dig in" simultaneously. Only Tina cried out "Hold on!" in a panic.

With a distraught expression while shaking her head, Tina resolved herself and pointed at the plate:

"Uh, what... is this?"

Rentaro followed Tina's gaze to observe the object sitting on the clean white plate. It was a spindle-shaped tuberous root exhibiting purple skin.

"You're asking what it is...? Isn't this a sweet potato? Sometimes called a yam in North America. It's a herbaceous perennial vine in the Convolvulaceae family."

"Th-That's not what I mean... Is this all? I mean, is dinner tonight just this?"

Realizing what Tina meant, Kisara pressed an index finger against her chin with apparent incomprehension, moaning "hmmm" softly. Finally, she clapped her hands and stood up with a "I got it" look and disappeared into the kitchen, only saying "Please wait a sec."

Only then did Tina relax her expression and breathe a sigh of relief.

"Seriously, CEO Tendo, this joke has gone far enough."

Returning swiftly, Kisara plopped a cup down in front of Tina's spot with a thud.

"Here, this is tap water. Drink as much as you'd like."

Tina instantly froze.

"E-Excuse me... CEO, is our company that unprofitable?"

"Poor as church mice."

"Oh, then what are we having tomorrow?"

"Beans and bean sprout soup with plain udon noodles. As a bonus, there are bread crusts, free from the bakery."

"The day after that?"

"Stir-fried bean sprouts with bread crusts."

"The day after that?"

"Bread crusts."

Feeling more and more impoverished, Tina asked gingerly:

"F-Four days from now?"

Kisara clapped her hands together before her chest as though saying "good question" and smiled:

"For a change of taste, let's have *fried buns ear* on the fourth day."

"Isn't that just fried crusts!?"

Tina wailed in sorrow.

"I am native to America after all. You can't deceive me by using English!"

Kisara's expression dramatically changed in an instant. Slamming the table impatiently, she stood up and said:

"What can I do!? The number of missions accomplished this month is zero again. To be honest, we could have had barbecued beef today but this resulted from Satomi's stupidity. And today, even Tina was at the scene..."

Rentaro scratched the back of his head. He was unable to refute the accusations. He never expected the Katagiri Civil Security Company to steal the kill...

Tonight, Tendo Civil Security was going hungry again.

"But why are we always poor?"

Skipping the "let's dig in" step, Enju spun the sweet potato with her index finger to play while asking without thought.

Rentaro nodded too and concurred with Enju's question:

"Yeah, Miss Kisara, where did our reward from the Third Kantō Battle go?"

Besides, the Tendo Civil Security Company had taken care of three major incidents: the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, the Seitenshi Sniping Incident and the Third Kantō Battle.

Any one of these should have brought plenty of remuneration.

Kisara's face went stiff for some reason then her cheeks quickly went red. Looking up at Rentaro, she whispered pitifully:

"Well, Satomi, I never explained in detail to you that two months ago, during the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, I was unable to pay the office's rent due to the company's cashflow problems... Consequently, I had to take out a loan."

"Who did you borrow from?"

Rentaro asked with a foreboding feeling. Kisara awkwardly pointed at the ceiling, which was where the loan sharks—Koufuu Finance—were located on the fourth floor."

Seemingly even more awkward, Kisara continued:

"Silly as you are, Satomi, you probably don't know that there is this concept of 'compound interest' when taking out loans. For example, didn't I borrow a million? So ten days later, I have to pay 10% interest, meaning I have to return a million and a hundred thousand. After another ten days, 10% interest is further imposed on the million and a hundred thousand, increasing the debt to a million two hundred and ten thousand..."

"Wah—" Tina hid her face in her hands and cried as soon as she heard that.

Rentaro closed his eyes firmly and apologized to her in his thoughts. Sorry—Sorry Tina. Our CEO has absolutely no common sense.

"What did you use as collateral to take out the loan?"

"Satomi's organs."

Kisara swiftly said something unclear.

"What?"

"Basically... Your organs, Satomi, you see? Mr. Abe said that your lungs and cornea ought to fetch a good price, Satomi."

"Gah?"

Red in the face, arms akimbo in resignation, Kisara said in sulking tone of voice:

"As an employee, Satomi, you are property under my name as the CEO. Besides, being able to work alongside such an adorable CEO, surely it must be okay to hand over your cornea obediently, right!?"

Rentaro could only stare at Kisara silently.

—Did the girl I love just ask me to hand over my organs?

Enju also seemed shocked, finally turning her gaze back to the plate on the table.

"Then these sweet potatoes..."

Kisara tossed her hair stylishly and said in an awe-inspiring voice:

"Indeed, this is precisely the 'last supper.' After today, we'll be living on bean sprouts and bread crusts. Starting from the seventh day, we'll be subsisting on water alone, so this is already quite a luxury."

With everyone staring at sweet potatoes randomly arranged on the plates, the office fell silent.

Enju quietly raised her hand:

"I suggest rationing out the sweet potatoes. Kisara's sweet potato should be divided into three equally and shared between me, Tina and Rentaro."

"W-Why?"

"Because, I, Tina and Rentaro cannot last three days without food and water, but your boobs have stored enough nutrition to sustain you for at least a year without problems."

"How can I last a year without eating or drinking? I'm not a monster!"

It was Kisara's turn to wail.

"B-By the way, stop picking on my chest all the time, Enju, larger busts are actually not that great, okay? Not only do my shoulders ache, but it's also hard to find cute bras and there are heat rashes—"

How sad, Kisara could not empathize with the have-nots at all.

"Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

Going into mammary hysteria, Enju jumped over the glass table to pounce on Kisara.

"Then why not give them to me! Give me back the boobs you absorbed from me."

"Owwwwwww! Stop it, Enju, quit tugging! I-I'll get hurt!"

While Tina was watching in trepidation, Rentaro shook his head and said:

"Everyone is in a bad mood because of hunger."

He sighed deeply. Then suddenly, he looked at Kisara with an incredulous expression:

"Aren't we the 'Saviors of the Tokyo Area' after all? Why can't we get any jobs at all?"

Finally escaped from Enju's fierce offensive, Kisara panted heavily while looking at him:

"There's someone from the American east coast who wants us to defeat a great white shark Gastrea roaming the seaside. All the famous shark hunters have apparently been eaten by that thing, giving a headache to local oceanologists and the police commissioner there. Would you like to go?"

"Better leave that to experts in aquatic combat. What else?"

Tearing a note from the pad beside the telephone, Kisara looked down to examine it:

"Let me read them out for you. 'The take-out I ordered hasn't been delivered yet. Help me out here.' 'I want a duel with Rentaro Satomi. Let's decide who is the true man here!' 'What color underwear is CEO Tendo wearing right now, I wonder. Haha.' 'Help me get rid of the cockroaches in the cupboard, 'kay?' 'I want my neighbor's wife slaughtered.'—That's pretty much how they go."

Rentaro could not help but fall into despair. What do these people take CivSecs for?

"Is there any other way to make money?"

"Go work at the gay bar on the first floor, Satomi. They said the hourly rate was 8000."

"Why don't you just work at the cabaret club on the second floor, Miss Kisara? They said they're willing to offer 10000 per hour."

"The gay bar on the first floor said that if you're willing to strip dance, Satomi, the hourly rate can reach 20000."

"..."

Whether the yakuza on the fourth floor, the cabaret manager on the second floor or the boys from the gay bar on the first floor, all the other tenants of the Happy Building were happy all year round, but Rentaro found it difficult to get along with them.

Speaking of which—Enju rubbed her chin seriously and said:

"Even though we're not getting any jobs, I still keep hearing about a constant rise in cases of Gastrea appearances."

Hearing Enju's question, Rentaro nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, definitely it feels like there are too many."

Whenever Gastrea were spotted by eyewitnesses or security cameras, all CivSecs within a 10km radius would automatically receive an alert text message, kickstarting a scramble to see who could kill the Gastrea first. Although cooperation occurred sometimes, the prize money was essentially claimed from the state government by the one who killed the monster first. Civil Security Companies usually carried out these kinds of missions when not undertaking commissioned requests, but the recent spike was quite unusual.

Apart from getting roused during sleep, getting annoying alerts on the cellphone during class before summer holidays made Rentaro a totally bad student.

Fortunately, infection outbreaks were always avoided thanks to residents well-drilled in evacuation procedures and the swift arrival of CivSecs. Nevertheless, these hair-raising events were way too frequent.

Apart from that, among the many alerts, the Tendo Civil Security Company always managed to miss out on the reward, how utterly shameful...

"Perhaps there's another problem with the Monoliths?"

"Impossible."

Rentaro rejected Kisara's speculation instantly, but lacked confidence. During the Third Kantō Battle last time, flaws had appeared in one of the Monoliths that were held to be as firm as a rock, causing an inevitable human disaster.

There were no absolutes in so-called safety. Less than a month had passed since Rentaro's personal experience with such a lesson.

The gazes of everyone in the office naturally turned outside the window. On the other side of the reddened sky, a towering and unmovable Monolith's top disappeared into the clouds.

"This thing, it tastes bad..."

Rentaro looked back to find Tina chewing a sweet potato with a bitter expression.

Curious, Enju also took a bite then stuck out her tongue with an unpleasant expression on her face:

"Ugh, the inside isn't even cooked."

"Huh? Eh? Really?"

Staring at the awkward Kisara, Enju could not help but sigh:

"Kisara should seriously learn proper cooking skills under Rentaro's instruction."

The highborn lady, unversed in worldly affairs, slumped her shoulders in dejection. Finally, she looked up at Rentaro with resignation and said:

"Are you willing to teach me?"

"S-Sure."

Kisara sighed forcefully again and in a helpless gait, walked over to the Klimt replica painting hanging on the other side of the way behind the office desk of ebony, then took out an envelop from behind the frame.

"Take it. This is the money I saved up bit by bit. I'm entrusting this to Enju and Tina. Buy some food with this for today."

Saying that, Kisara placed a ten thousand yen note in the girls' hands, brightening Enju and Tina's faces.

"I shall choose things as cheap as possible!" Enju raised her hand and declared then left the office with Tina in tow. As their lively jumping footsteps gradually faded away downstairs, silence suddenly shrouded the room.

The clock read half past seven in the evening.

As though to fill up the silence, the evening cicadas chirped in what felt like a lonely manner. From the edge of the sky that was darkening from red to blue, the weak lingering glow dyed the indoors with faint color.

With the disappearance of the lingering glow, a gibbous moon appeared in the blue sky. The signs outside the window also began flash regularly with LEDs on their edges, telling people that the night district of Magatachou had awakened.

Inside the dim room, a musty smell seemed to hang about.

"We're the only ones left."

"Yeah."

Glancing swiftly at the side of Kisara's face, Rentaro continued:

"So?"

"Hmm?"

"You deliberately got rid of Enju and Tina using shopping as an excuse because you've got something to tell me, right?"

"Yes—Indeed."

Kisara slowly reached behind her and untied the apron then ran her hand through her beautiful hair. The apron fell to her feet with the sound of clothing friction. Then she drew her feet out.

The loafers on her feet made a sound as she sat down on the office desk of ebony, then turned towards Rentaro with some hesitation.

"Umm, Satomi... Someone wants to meet me for a marriage interview."

Rentaro stared at Kisara in surprise, only to see her swaying her long and slender legs still with her head down:

"It was arranged through Mr. Shigaki. Although I insisted that it wasn't necessary, seeing as he used to take care of me, I couldn't refuse."

Mr. Shigaki... Hearing this name, Rentaro could not muster any strong opposition either.

Senichi Shigaki was the man who used to work as the butler at the Tendo household. Rentaro remembered that he ought to be fifty-six years old this year.

Living in the Tendo mansion during childhood, Rentaro and Kisara knew him from a very long time ago. Even after leaving his position as butler, he still looked after Rentaro and Kisara privately.

More importantly, he was Tendo Civil Security's proprietor on paper and the savior serving as Rentaro and Kisara's legal guardian. Hence, it was impossible to reject him coldly.

"But why so suddenly?"

Kisara was already disowned by the Tendo clan. As a daughter of the Tendos, getting married off at age sixteen as a sacrifice in exchange for expansion of authority would not be strange, but she no longer belonged to that family and could not be used as a tool for political marriage.

With what sort of intent did the prospective suitor make the offer of a marriage interview to her?

Presumably guessing Rentaro's thoughts, Kisara shook her head and said:

"I'm not too sure either. However, the prospective groom is also someone you're familiar with, Satomi."

"I know him too?"

Kisara took out a sheet of paper from the office desk and handed it over to Rentaro.

Shifting his gaze, Rentaro was shocked.

"This is... Atsurou Hitsuma? ...No way, how...?"

On the resume-style cotton paper was an upper body photo staring back at him.

The slightly elongated face was wearing silver-rimmed glasses. The facial features seemed quite intellectual.

"I remember the last time I met Mr. Hitsuma was when we were eleven."

Rentaro's gaze swept over to the details on the side and found out that he was born in a police family and had entered the Metropolitan Police Department after passing the National Civil Service Exam. His current rank was superintendent. His father was a respected senior member of the police force and recorded in fluid calligraphy were various positions from his illustrious career including Superintendent-General of the MPD.

Superior height, superior income, superior education. He exhibited the traits of an ideal man's—More importantly, he used to be engaged to Kisara.

"When you left the Tendo family, Miss Kisara, wasn't the marriage contract voided...?"

"I thought so too. But who knows what business he has in seeking me out now?"

Rentaro felt an indescribable sense of revulsion gradually expanding from his chest.

I don't want to listen to her talk about it anymore—Rentaro felt an impulse to leave as quickly as possible.

However, he silently returned the information to Kisara then feigned nonchalance and asked:

"When is the interview?"

".....Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

So it was imminent?

"You understand now?"

Winding her hair around a finger, Kisara deliberately avoided eye contact.

"It's not like I wanted to hide it from you, but it's very difficult to bring up, that's why I procrastinated until today..."

Only now did Rentaro realize he was clenching his fist so hard that his fingernails were digging into his skin.

Kisara lifted her head but still gazed downwards.

"Satomi, I hope you can accompany me to the marriage interview."

"...What do you mean?"

"The prospective groom will apparently be accompanied by his parents. On my side, I have Mr. Shigaki to accompany me as my guardian but that's still missing one person. Apart from you, Satomi, I don't have anyone else I could ask. Please, even though this is very unusual, could you accompany me?"

".....I don't mind."

"Really? I'm so glad."

The beauty in black exhaled in relief but still a little bit worried, she secretly glanced at him and said:

"Satomi, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"Are you against my attending a marriage interview, Satomi?"

Of course he was against it. As soon as he imagined Kisara being embraced in another man's arms, Rentaro felt a stomach cramp.



However, he understood very well that Kisara Tendo was an authentic daughter from a prestigious family.

Even in modern Japan where the caste system had disappeared a long time ago, the Tendo clan, belonging to the super elite class, still stood as one of the rare exceptions.

Once born as a daughter of the Tendo clan, one would be obliged to an arranged marriage with a highborn eldest son and could not marry any stray dog from the roadside, of course. Ever since the Tendo clan was founded, there were no exceptions.

To be honest, had Kisara not taken initiative to approach Rentaro the adopted child, the two of them might not have had any contact for the rest of their lives. When Rentaro first arrived at the Tendo household, the lady serving as the governess kept repeating to him as though performing brainwashing:

'Listen carefully, okay? The Tendos are not ordinary people. Absolutely do not delude yourself into thinking you can get along with them as equals.'

"...I think this marriage interview is great. If all goes well, you'll be able to obtain happiness, Miss Kisara, and I'm sure Enju and Tina will be happy."

"Do you think so too, Satomi?"

A car's high beams lit up the office's interior momentarily, illuminating the sides of Rentaro and Kisara's faces clearly.

Rentaro lifted his head and stared straight at Kisara.

"Certainly."

For some reason, this answer made Kisara show a hurt expression and look down. In the end, she forced herself to smile as though enduring pain.

"I-I see, okay. You're right. After all, it's not like we're going out or anything. I said something strange. So stupid of me."

Kisara looked like she was trying to cover things up by laughing as she knocked her head and stuck out her tongue.

This was the limit.

"I'm still worried about Enju and Tina so I'm gonna check things out."

Without waiting for her response, Rentaro immediately turned around and made his way to the office's door, ignoring Kisara while she seemed like she was trying to say something but could not.

Going down the stairs swiftly, Rentaro was just about to leave the Happy Building when he felt a minor impact on his right shoulder. Because his mind was occupied by Kisara completely, he failed to notice he had bumped into someone until a moment later.

"Hey, aren't you Rentaro!?"

Rentaro looked up in surprise to see the face of a man about to enter the Happy Building's staircase. The man seemed to be smiling happily.

His was very young, about the same age as Rentaro. A long face with what seemed like a wide forehead, with hair dyed in a color between brown and orange. Due to his sharp gaze, he looked a bit like a punk but his face was very likable when he smiled. How unbelievable.

Finding him familiar, Rentaro searched his own memories repeatedly until the man before him finally superimposed with a boy's face from the distant past.

He cried out "Oh."

"Are you actually Suibara? Year 4 Class 5, student number ten, Kihachi Suibara?"

Rentaro's hunch was apparently correct. The man grinned even more happily and stuffed his hands into his jeans' pockets.

"That's right. You're Rentaro Satomi from Year 4 Class 5's student number nine."

Saying that, Suibara quickly hugged Rentaro's shoulders and cried out very happily:

"This brings back so many memories! I never thought you'd still be alive, bastard."

"S-Same here."

The unexpected long-time friend's passionate welcome made Rentaro's field of view shake violently, but compared to the serendipitous joy, Rentaro felt deeply perplexed as a result of other emotions.

Lifting his gaze towards the building before him, Rentaro asked:

"But Suibara, you were going into this Happy Building just now? I don't suppose you're working at a cabaret or a gay bar at age sixteen—"

Then looking at the Rolex worn on Suibara's wrist, he said:

"—I don't think you look like you need a high-interest loan either."

Suibara rolled his eyes in protest.

"That goes without saying, you moron."

"So—"

Suibara pointed at himself and made a thumbs-up.

"That's right, I'm looking for the Tendo Civil Security Company. I'm a client with a request, Rentaro."

—A client with a request? To think the childhood playmate whom he had not heard from for years had become a client?

Including the matter of Hitsuma today, Rentaro felt as though old familiar figures were popping up one after another.

Rentaro felt surprised while Suibara shrugged.

"This isn't a good place to talk. Let's go into your office first."

"Sure..."

Rentaro did not know how to answer. Having terminated the conversation with Kisara forcefully just now and fled the office, it was very embarrassing to return straight away.

Rentaro shook his head.

No, that was wrong. He had to take the client up. Why must he suffer this feeling of an uneasy conscience?

Leading Suibara up the building's staircase, Rentaro finally arrived at the door to Tendo Civil Security. The sky was already quite dark and there were no signs of lights on inside.

Rentaro turned the door handle and entered without knocking. Kisara was sitting in the CEO chair, looking out the window with a depressed expression. Noticing the movement, she suddenly stood up, causing the chair to creak. Then she ran over and said:

"Wonderful, Satomi, I've been thinking for so long after that—"

She hastily spoke up but stopped herself after noticing Suibara behind Rentaro's back.

Rentaro's emotions became very turbulent but making a poker face, he said:

"This is a client."

Kisara's originally happy expression froze as she looked down sadly:

"Is that so..."

What the heck, Rentaro grumbled in his mind. Clearly a few hours earlier, wasn't she totally eager for customers to arrive?

Suibara hastily tried to smooth things out.

"W-What's wrong? Did I come at a bad time?"

Before Rentaro could answer, Kisara shook her head hard.

"Nothing of that sort. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, I am Kisara Tendo the CEO."

Smiling lightly, Kisara extended her hand. With a flattered look of surprise, Suibara gingerly shook hands with Kisara.

"N-Nice to meet you, I am Suibara Kihachi."

"Do pardon this place for being so cramped and messy, but please come in."

Kisara picked up the remote from the desk and pressed a button, instantly producing bright lighting from the ceiling. Rentaro could not help but narrow his eyes.

The paper that Enju and Tina were doodling on were scattered all over the floor. The plates with half-eaten sweet potatoes had yet to be cleared from the table. Kisara's humble words were not a joke at all. The messy office's interior was instantly revealed from the darkness.

"Excuse me, let me clean up a bit."

"Oh, about this matter..."

Suibara continued slightly apprehensively:

"I'm very sorry but I hope to speak with Rentaro alone about what the job entails."

Rentaro and Kisara exchanged a glance. What this implied was asking Kisara to leave for now. Although this mysterious request was baffling, arguing about it here would be of no help. Rentaro nodded to convey "leave it to me" and Kisara nodded in return.

"Then I shall go out to see how Enju and Tina are doing."

"...Yeah, I'm counting on you."

Seeing Kisara off, Rentaro casually tidied the guest sofas so that he and Suibara could sit down with the glass table between them.

After Kisara left, Suibara spread his hands and made a leisurely look.

"So that's the Miss Kisara Tendo you often mentioned when you were young. What a great beauty. I've never seen a girl so pretty in my whole life."

Rentaro agreed silently.

With Kisara first and foremost and including Miori and Seitenshi, Rentaro was surrounded by what the world would call women of ruinous beauty.

Having known them for so long, Rentaro had almost forgotten this fact, but from his perspective, whenever Kisara stood together with Miori or when she was in the same room as Seitenshi, he was always forced to hold his breath from the overwhelming rivalry between two peerless beauties.

But that Kisara was going to a marriage interview with Atsurou Hitsuma tomorrow...

Rentaro shook his head to dispel that thought.

"So? What business do you have here?"

Suibara turned his head to look around the office's interior with curiosity before saying:

"Do you remember when we met?"

"Hmm? Oh, of course I remember..."

Closing his eyes, Rentaro instantly thought back to the four year of elementary school.

Back then, four years had elapsed since Rentaro lost his right arm, right leg and left eye. As it happened to be a period when his prostheses had to be frequently replaced to accommodate the body's development, every day was lived in pain, to the point that he almost wanted death to end it all.

To be honest, the metallic surfaces of his prostheses only started being covered up by artificial skin not too long ago. In other words, Rentaro's childhood was spent with his black prosthetic limbs exposed twenty-four hours a day, including during school.

"Everyone found my unknown black arm and leg disgusting and stayed away from me. Only you were different. I remember you had a Cursed Child in your family, which was why the class rejected you."

"Yeah, my little sister."

The story of Suibara and his sister ended in tragedy.

Ever since rumors of having a Cursed Child in the family spread out, of course it incurred the resentment of many people.

Suibara's mother was the first to break down from the stone-throwing of nearby residents and the profane graffiti on the home's external walls. Often muttering "if only that child hadn't been born," his mother sounded like a neurotic patient. Furthermore, it was unfortunate that Suibara's father kept a handgun in the storage at home for self-defense.

All necessary ingredients for a tragedy had gathered.

"We were equally lonely. That's why we played together all the time."

Rentaro muttered with heartfelt resonance. Suibara also happily joined in.

"So true, so true. You were particularly knowledgeable about things like bugs and fishes, so I was able to have fun learning all kinds of knowledge just by running around the mountains together with you. For example, there's stuff like catching shrimps using a hook and line or making insect specimens."

Prompted by his topic of conversation, Rentaro felt his childhood memories pour out like opening a toy chest. Back when he had no friends and was even unable to go out freely to play, he spent day after day reading insect and plant picture books in the library at the Tendo mansion. Hence, his knowledge in this area grew peerless by the time he knew it.

"In exchange, your swearing ways rubbed off on me."

Suibara laughed happily.

"I remember you were such a polite little boy when I first met you."

Rentaro felt his cheeks grow hot and could not help but turn away forcefully.

"Shut the fuck up—Back when I imitated the way you spoke, Miss Kisara even said 'Satomi has become a delinquent,' making me feel sad for so long."

"So you were imitating how I talk. Go to hell, fucker."

"No, you go the fuck to hell."

Rentaro and Suibara stared at each other. One of them ended up bursting out in laughter first, but neither could tell who it was.

"Rentaro."

Sitting on the sofa, Suibara leaned forward and lowered his gaze onto his overlapping hands, thinking something in his mind.

"It feels quite unfair if I don't show you this first."

Sayin that, he reached towards his underarm and took out something. Rentaro gasped after looking at it.

The black object was placed onto the glass table with a solid sound. Made from a gloss-less metallic frame of matte black and for the purpose of weight reduction, the trigger assembly and even the slide were made of glass fiber reinforced composite materials, a sixth generation Glock.

Why? Rentaro wondered. Ordinary people were not allowed to take self-defense handguns outside of the house. In 2031 Japan, the only people authorized to carry handguns outside were the police, the SDF and—

Suibara took out synthetic leather pass case from his waist and placed it over the handgun.

Seeing the CivSec license which had a photo on it, Rentaro truly jumped in surprise this time.

"Suibara, you're a CivSec?"

Suibara took out his cellphone and operated it with a happy expression to bring up a photo for Rentaro to see.

It looked like he had forced a girl who hated to be photographed. The photo showed a girl with a bob cut who had shyly averted her gaze.

"Hey you..."

Probably noticing Rentaro's shocked attitude, Suibara said with an even prouder look:

"She's my Initiator, called Hotaru Kouro. Isn't she cute? You know I super love her—"

"Hold it right there."

Rentaro felt confused but still squeezed these words out.

Suibara's family was destroyed due to a Cursed Child. It was hard to believe that he would partner with a Cursed Child as a CivSec pair given his past.

At the same time, if every day of his life required him to depend on an Initiator to make a living, it would be utterly tragic.

"...That girl, is she a replacement for your dead sister?"

Rentaro questioned calmly. Suibara turned his face away with displeasure and said:

"No, it ain't like that. That doesn't matter anyway."

Rather—Correcting the conversation subject after a pause, Suibara rested his elbows on the table and supported his chin in his hands.

"You should listen to my request first."

Finally, the main point.

What was known as CivSecs hiring CivSecs was essentially outsourcing. In the majority of cases, they came from CivSecs who had taken on too much work to handle themselves, or possibly when they wanted to discard difficult missions.

However, even equipped with this basic knowledge, Rentaro still could not dispel a foreboding sense. Suibara's case could not be judged by common sense.

"Go on."

Then back to the main subject—Suibara replied. Then what he said next swept the prior casual atmosphere entirely away.

"Rentaro, you are the final test subject developed by the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's supersoldier project, aren't you?"

Rentaro was so surprised that he instantly stood up from the sofa.

Why did he know this? Perhaps he could speculate from Rentaro's black prosthetic limbs that they were made of varanium, but it should be impossible to connect to the New Human Creation Plan.

Glancing at Rentaro who was staring wide-eyed silently, Suibara muttered: "As expected, my hunch was right." But for some reason, Suibara's face looked like this was a truth that he did not wish to have guessed, a kind of unpleasant feeling that could not be dispelled.

"Rentaro, there are some terrible rumors. New World Creation Plan, Black Swan Project—no matter under what name, have you heard of any of these terms?"

"New World Creation Plan? Black Swan Project? ...Nope."

New World Creation Plan—What was that...? The name sounded greatly similar to the New Human Creation Plan. Rentaro felt a detestable foreboding feeling rise slowly up his spine.

Hearing Rentaro's answer, Suibara answered "Really?" quietly and kept staring at the glass ashtray on the table in silence for quite a while.

Rentaro could only wait for him to continue.

"Rentaro, I don't know how much self-awareness you have but among us CivSecs, whether for better or worse, you are the center of rumors. Apart from being raised in the Tendo household, there's even stuff about private dealings with Her Highness Seitenshi."

Suibara paused there for now and looked up.

"What I want to ask is nothing else but for you to hook me up with the Tendo faction and Her Highness Seitenshi. I've got something I must say in person to His Excellency Kikunojyo Tendo who counsels Her Highness Seitenshi. This involves a crisis for the Tokyo Area."

"Is that related to the New World Creation Plan or Black Swan Project you just mentioned?"

"Exactly."

"You can't ask someone else to hook you up?"

"No. Recklessly spreading word would most likely reach *those people's* ears."

"You want to expose a conspiracy? If you give me the evidence, I could help you hand it over."

"Sorry, but the evidence was stolen."

"Stolen?"

Suibara nodded gravely.

"My home has been invaded a number of times lately and I lost many things. The evidence is one of them. So all I can do is a direct appeal as the witness. Apart from that, you're the only one I can trust."

It sounded extremely serious.

Rentaro touched his chin.

Naturally, he did not hold any negative opinions about Suibara. He also hoped to fulfill Suibara's wishes as much as possible.

The problem was how. Apart from the fact that he had already broke off relations with Kikunojyo completely, plus they were completely at odds after the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, besides, Kikunojyo might very well not want to see Rentaro's face at all. But if it was about contacting Seitenshi whom Rentaro had exchanged phone number with—There ought to be a way.

"I have one condition. You must tell me beforehand what you're gonna say to Her Highness Seitenshi."

"What, you don't trust me?"

"She is the head of state, so I've gotta be more cautious."

"...Yeah, that's only natural."

Suibara showed an attitude of compromise but looked around nervously in the office.

"This room wouldn't be bugged, would it?"

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about eavesdropping. Can the tenants above and below be trusted?"

"Well."

Rentaro followed Suibara's gaze to examine the office. The ceiling and the floor were thinner than imagined and voices easily penetrated the mortar material. Apart from behind very close to the neighboring building, this was an old structure with poor soundproofing.

If someone installed proper eavesdropping equipment and a microphone, there would be absolutely no guarantee on a client's privacy.

"Discussing it here is no good. Let's meet tomorrow night at the Magata Municipal Office that's still under construction. We can talk without worry there. But after you listen, there's no backing out anymore."

Suibara's eyes seemed very serious. Rentaro could not help but shudder.

It looked that that was it for today. After clarifying that a super high reward would be provided, Suibara slowly stood up from the sofa. Rentaro also got up, intending to see him off, so they chatted over sundry matters while reaching the ground floor.

The sky outside was completely dark. Amidst the turmoil of the crowds, women in the nighttime entertainment business were mingling with salarymen who were out drinking.

The wind blowing across people's skin carried the steaming heat of August.

Coincidentally, Enju, Tina and Kisara were up ahead, returning with their arms fully laden with shopping bags. Having finished shopping, the three girls seemed very happy, joking with one another as they meandered through the streets. Rentaro could even hear their laughter. Their figures were back lit by the street lights behind them.

Suibara narrowed his eyes for an instant as though he had seen something blinding. Then slowly, he patted Rentaro's shoulder and said:

"Rentaro, *those people* have already judged you as someone related to me. I'm sorry for getting you involved, but you must take care."

""Those people'?"

Suibara stuck his hands into his pockets and left without looking back.

Seeing him disappear into the distance, Rentaro wondered. To this date, he still did not have a clear idea on how to regard this old friend after the many years of separation.

The friend's back looked morose, probably due to shouldering too many secrets. If only Rentaro had forced him to spit it out and lessened his burden.

Rentaro used to think that he had long forgotten his younger sister who had died young, but the fact that Suibara was working in a field related to Cursed Children greatly shocked Rentaro.

Rentaro was unable to understand how Suibara's state of mind changed or how the Initiator who served as his sister's replacement felt.

In any case, based on what Suibara said, there were words that Rentaro absolutely could not take lightly. There was still time until the following night, hence Rentaro decided to use it to investigate a bit.

"Hmm, the client left?"

Only then did he notice Enju had lift up her shopping bags, looking at him with a smile.

"Look, I bought so much vegetables and meat on limited offer discounts. Let's use Kisara's saved up money to hold a barbecue party tonight!"

Rentaro looked at Kisara, who happened to be looking at him as well. The two of them averted gazes virtually at the same time.

Trying as hard as he could not to show an embarrassed face, Rentaro turned to Enju and forced out a smile.

"Sorry, Enju, I'm not hungry right now. You three go eat without me."

"Huh?"

Enju's face froze then gradually showed unease.

"Did... something happen?"

"Nothing, I just want to eat by myself every now and then, 'kay?"

Saying that, Rentaro turned and walked away, avoiding the sight of Kisara's expression.

Part 3

Having accumulated water to a certain weight, the bamboo tube rotated, its tail end striking a rock.

The crisp sound from the bamboo tube could be heard from the other side of the veranda, very pleasant to the ear.

In contrast, the place where Kisara was currently sitting was filled with irritating noise.

"—In any case, this child was very disobedient during his rebellious phase but in the end, he still decided to walk in his father's footsteps to pursue a career in the same field. Also back when he was at the police academy, whether in theory or practice, the instructors would always—"

"—Please, enough of those embarrassing memories."

"—Hahaha, that is rather remarkable. More and more, I feel as though our Kisara cannot match up to him."

An old man was sitting as the guest of honor, laughing heartily. Across the table from him was Superintendent-General Hitsuma of the MPD with a scarred face like a ruffian's. Wearing thick-rimmed glasses, the Superintendent-General's wife was emitting "ohoho" laughter from her mouth.

"No no, absolutely nothing of that sort. Miss Tendo is as pretty as a doll. Our Atsurou fell in love with her at first sight."

There was probably no woman who did not liked being praised for their beauty. But given the joking atmosphere earlier, it was hard to accept these words as sincere.

Currently, Kisara was at the high-class restaurant called the Utorotei. Those present at the marriage interview numbered six in total, including Kisara herself. Although there were six people, only half of them was participating in the dialogue. Sitting next to Kisara was Rentaro in his eternal attire of school uniform with an inscrutable expression on his face.

Back when Kisara brought up the impending marriage interview, she expected him to angrily dissuade her.

However, he calmly expressed the okay. Apart from disappointment, Kisara also felt anger—extreme anger at that.

For some reason, Kisara had been looking forward to Rentaro disrupting this marriage interview. But on what basis exactly?

Thinking until she was annoyed, Kisara could not help but admire the furnishings of the Japanese-style room. Finding an exquisitely carved mirror decorating the side of a hanging scroll, she was unable to resist the urge to crane her neck and examine her appearance.

Having applied makeup today with lipstick, a hair ornament worn on her head, Kisara's kimono-clad image was reflected in the mirror.

Due to her acquaintance with the daughter of Shiba Heavy Industries who loved to wear kimonos, Kisara felt a natural repulsion towards kimonos. Nevertheless, this look was pretty cute, actually.

I knew it, my face looks best at an inclination of forty-five degrees. Thinking that while slightly adjusting the angle of her face towards the mirror, Kisara suddenly felt a gaze.

Sitting opposite her, the glasses-wearing man was smiling while watching her intently. Feeling her cheeks grow hot, Kisara hastily straightened her sitting posture.

There was one more person. Apart from those previously named, there was another who was participating in this event.

Although they had yet to have a chance to talk to each properly, Kisara found him to be a man even more slender and decorous than what the photo suggested.

Atsurou Hitsuma. Dressed in a kimono embroidered with the family crest, he had maintained a straight sitting posture the whole time. Compared to five years ago, he had grown even taller and masculine.

"Then old people like us should depart first and let the young ones chat more comfortably—"

Finally done with the chitchat, Mrs. Hitsuma expressed so, instantly standing up without waiting for others to reply.

"W-What the heck? Why do I have to leave when I'm not old—"

"Do you even need to ask, fool? Hurry and get yourself over here."

Senichi Shigaki got up while pulling Rentaro as Mr. and Mrs. Hitsuma also left the table. Sliding the paper door open, the group walked outside.

Only silence remained in the room.

Kisara sighed lightly while Hitsuma bowed his head politely and said.

"Sorry, my parents seem to be overexcited."

"It has been a long time, Mr. Hitsuma."

"Indeed, we have not seen each other for five years."

Kisara was still feeling very troubled, unable to decide what kind of attitude with which to face the man before her.

"Uh... I heard you were promoted to superintendent."

"Haha, I was still a total rookie when I first entered the MPD five years ago. Compared to then, I guess there has been some progress. Speaking of which, you are like a different person compared to five years ago. Before, you were only on the level of cute, but now you are beautiful beyond description."

"Seriously, Mr. Hitsuma, you keep showering me with such flattery."

This was not acting. Kisara was bowing her head while blushing for real.

"...But Mr. Hitsuma, why so suddenly—"

"What do you mean?"

Feeling guilty in the face of Hitsuma's candid smile, Kisara continued:

"I feel very apologetic to you, Mr. Hitsuma. It was all because I unilaterally disassociated myself from the Tendo family that your family received notice that the engagement was called off. Hence, I am sure that family knows very clearly that a marriage with me is unable to establish relations with the Tendo family. I have already betrayed the Tendos and naturally regarded as an outsider by the main family. Even if I continue to bear this family name of Tendo, in my heart, I have already deemed myself completely cut off from the Tendos."

If possible, Kisara wanted to extract every last drop of Tendo blood from her body to replace with another clan's blood. However, she did not voice this idea.

"Actually, I was not seeking relations with the Tendos when I asked Mr. Shigaki to arrange for this occasion."

"Why is that? Your father is the Superintendent-General and you are a superintendent, Mr. Hitsuma. You ought to be very popular with other ladies."

"I am unable to forget you after a single glance. Is this reason not enough?"

The sudden declaration caused Kisara to turn her face away, reddened in embarrassment.

"My, what a joker you are."

"I am not joking."

"In that case... That would be even more embarrassing."

Even while hearing Hitsuma's sweet words, a dark voice was still surfacing in a certain part of Kisara's heart.

Kisara had gone through an innocent phase once when she still believed in the story of Cinderella.

However, on the day her parents were devoured, she had thoroughly awakened from the dream of catching the eye of Prince Charming who would rescue her from distress. Even if Prince Charming or a sorcerer existed, there was no way to resurrect her dead parents now.

Kisara pulled herself together and straightened her back.

"I live to seek revenge on the Tendos."

She decided to change her strategy. Beautifying herself to put up a pretense, scrutinizing her partner greedily—She hated the very nature of a marriage interview to begin with, hence she told herself it was time to be upfront.

"I know that very well."

"Huh?"

The sound of a bamboo tube striking a rock was heard once more.

"Of course I understand your thoughts, Miss Tendo."

"That being the case, why arrange a marriage interview with me?"

"Yes. To be honest, I really feel that I might perhaps possess the ability to assist you on that front, Miss Tendo."

"H-How so?"

Kisara could not help but lean towards the table. At this time, Hitsuma's intellectual face instantly smiled as he pointed outside and said:

"Shall we talk while we walk?"

Naturally, Kisara could only nod.

They went outside through the veranda to take a stroll in the garden along a path paved with small white round stones. There was a small pond in the depths of the garden with a vermilion bridge decorated with imitation pearls on the railings.

Taking the fish food Hitsuma handed over, Kisara scattered it from the bridge's railing, causing carp to gather gradually, resulting in a colorful kaleidoscope-like display on the water surface.

"Then about the subject just now?"

Feeling she was getting hooked by his bait, Kisara still decided to feign disinterest.

"Miss Tendo, allow me to omit the details but in any case, we of the Hitsuma family do not hold a very positive view of the Tendos, in actual fact."

Kisara's eyebrows twitched once. While casting down fish food, she said without looking back:

"How unwise. The Tendo family imposes an elite education from childhood, producing many great figures in the political and business arenas. Seeking trouble with the Tendos is tantamount to seeking trouble with the state. Just like many enemies who attempted to challenge the Tendos and were sent to their graves in secret, your family shall be crushed in the same way."

"A direct confrontation might result in that type of end, but if the attack takes them by surprise, it is still possible to make a castle fall despite its iron defenses. For example, by using your method of assassinating the leaders of the Kikunojyo Tendo faction."

Splash—A carp leapt from the water.

"...How much do you know?"

"Only on the level of hearsay."

Kisara turned her head to look at Hitsuma and asked:

"I am very happy that you are willing to assist but this is my personal battle. I have no wish to be exploited by others."

"Please use me as much as possible. I will not exploit you."

Kisara frowned and said:

"These words truly do not inspire comfort. What exactly do you demand from me? Please clear this up directly."

Pressing his chin against his hand, Hitsuma made a ponderous look.

"Very well. Allow me to correct myself. There is something of yours that I desire."

Hitsuma suddenly held Kisara by the waist while his other hand grasped her hand. With his handsome face approaching, Kisara could not help but feel her heart pounding.

"You make me unable to contain myself. It is all the fault of your beauty. If by any chance you dislike me, please pick up that sword. Otherwise, I—"

Hitsuma's face continued to draw close. Kisara turned away her face that had gone as red as maple leaves in autumn.

"You've watched too many of Shakespeare's plays."

"These are my sincere feelings."

The warmth felt from a man's forcible embrace was making Kisara greatly surprised. At the same time, she wondered in her heart whether Satomi would do the same to her.

Hitsuma fished out an object from his pocket and pressed it into Kisara's hand.

The cold metallic texture in her palm made her jump in fright. Opening her palm, she found an object brightly shining golden under the sunlight.

"This is?"

"A pocket watch. Open it up and see."

Kisara followed his directions and opened the watch's cover of pure gold, her mouth slightly ajar from surprise. The long hand and the short hand were both made of gold. The classy looking watch face was inlaid with jewels around its edge. The sunlight reflected by the pocket watch produced an intense flood of light, dazzling Kisara's eyes.

"I'm so happy. Is this a gift for me?"

"I would be very pleased if you accepted this gift and not let it go to waste."

Kisara almost said thank you but suddenly came to her senses and changed what she intended to say:

"But we are no longer engaged."

"That is not a problem. I love you."

"...Hearing such sweet nothings whispered in my ear by someone like you, I might very well want to try those glass slippers, perhaps?"

"Then why not try them on?"

Staring at Hitsuma's approaching lips, Kisara slowly closed her eyes.

The expanse of white sand in the beautiful Japanese garden on the right hand side, together with the dry landscape that could elevate one's soul to new levels, none of it could brighten the gloom in Rentaro's heart.

Rentaro was walking on the wooden floorboards of the veranda, looking for the washroom while walking randomly all over the place with his heart filled with jealousy.

What the heck was Miss Kisara doing? I can't believe she put on makeup and even dressed up so cute deliberately. Can't she just put on an indifferent and uncaring look? In front of me, she just wears that black sailor-style uniform all year round.

Rentaro's inner displeasure was not only due to Hitsuma growing even more masculine than five years ago.

Furthermore, Kisara Tendo's first crush was none other than Hitsuma.

Most likely even Kisara herself was not aware that it was a first crush.

Those faint feelings of admiration were originally thought to have naturally extinguished with the passage of time. But seeing Kisara deliberately dress up for the marriage interview with him, Rentaro instantly lost confidence.

'Listen carefully, okay? The Tendos are not ordinary people. Absolutely do not delude yourself into thinking you can get along with them as equals.'

—What exactly do I expect Miss Kisara to do? I...

While examining the garden for no reason and turning a corner along the veranda, Rentaro suddenly halted in his steps.

Kisara and Hitsuma were standing on the vermilion bridge conversing.

Although Rentaro could not hear what they were saying, they looked quite happy. Was it Rentaro's imagination?

Hitsuma embraced Kisara and brought his lips near her face. The two figures overlapped together.

Rentaro felt his body stiffen as though struck by lightning as sweat poured out from his body nonstop.

Turning around right there, he quickened his footsteps and left the restaurant.

Confronted with Hitsuma's face that occupied her entire view, Kisara closed her eyes—However, before their lips could overlap with each other, Kisara intervened in time by inserting her palm between them.

Then she forcefully shoved Hitsuma's chest away.

"—Unhand me right now."

Hearing her say that, Hitsuma did not force her.

Kisara tried to hide her scorching face and readjusted the collar of her kimono.

"In other words, you are implying that I may freely make use of your resources. In return, you wish to obtain my person?"

"Yes, I don't mind even if you think of it like that."

Kisara feigned upright posture while thinking silently to herself. No matter what, her life meant as little to herself as pebbles on the roadside. This body only needed to be preserved until those four remaining Tendos were sent to their graves.

Having been born with such a beautiful face and body, wouldn't it be perfect to use them as bargaining chips?

Using others and getting used by others. What a simple relationship. Perhaps she might very well fall for Hitsuma.

Nevertheless, something suddenly stung Kisara painfully in the chest.

—Odd, isn't it? Was so-called love supposed to feel like this?

Part 4

"It infuriated you to see Kisara kissing someone else, which is why you fled from her presence?"

With a thrilled and delighted look on her face, the director of the forensic pathology laboratory—Sumire Muroto—stared intently at Rentaro.

"Nonsense, it's not like that."

"You're totally unconvincing when you retort with such posture."

Rentaro then noticed how he was sprawled on the table. Lethargically lifting up his upper torso, he looked up aimlessly at the incandescent bulb hanging on the ceiling of the dim basement.

Rentaro was visiting Sumire's forensic pathology lab.

When faced with trouble, he visited Sumire instead of going to pray to God.

In times like these, it would be more practical to rely on someone more experienced in life. Rentaro failed to get a wink of sleep last night. Suibara's matter was one of the reason, but to be honest, what bothered him the most was still the result of Kisara's marriage interview. Considering what Sumire was like, she could definitely cut straight to the chase and provide Rentaro with advice for his situation. That was what Rentaro believed when he boldly visited Sumire to talk over things—

"It's hopeless. Hopeless. Give up. It's almost a miracle that someone as desirable as Kisara could have remained single so far. Looks like a suitable buyer has finally knocked at her door."

Rentaro pouted.

"What the hell, Doctor, didn't you support me and Miss Kisara as a couple?"

"How could that even be possible? Suppose I left you and Kisara alone, the two of you would still have made no progress even by the time you became elderly citizens. I'm just watching from the sidelines, looking for a good show. Rather, I should say that if you and Kisara were progressing smoothly, I'd do my best to obstruct you."

"Terrible... You're truly a terrible person."

"Putting it this way would be better. Compelled by your excessive sex drive to push down Kisara and have your way with her, you end up getting arrested by the police and reported on the evening news—That's the kind of grand performance I'm expecting more from you."

"Why must it always involve the police?"

"Do you have any method of making Kisara your woman without doing something criminal?"

Rentaro shut himself up helplessly. Sumire sat herself down in front of him, waving her hands at Rentaro's eye level.

"You'd better give up, Rentaro. If you sleep with Kisara perhaps you might have a chance at getting married, but marriage isn't anything good either. Allow me to edify you with some insight on man-woman relationships. A so-called man not only has to endure a woman's hysterical and nagging proclivities but must also abandon his own dreams for the woman, suppressing the urge to look at other cute and busty women, instead going home obediently. The same goes for the woman who must endure the man's irritating fetishes while seeking fashion that interests the man, cooking food the man enjoys and even offering up her body. This is a chain of mutual tolerance. Men detest women on a fundamental level while women in turn detest men on a fundamental level too."

"Then why do people get married?"

"As Woody Allen put it, 'because we need the eggs'."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Good grief. Could you try thinking on your own once in a while? Ancient humans believed that the brain was merely an organ for secreting nasal mucus but it looks like your brain is also unable to perform any function beyond secreting nasal mucus. Your existence itself is already a tragedy. You know that I'm a nihilist, right? All you need to do is subtract the nihilist portion from my opinion."

"Then what's left?"

"Men love women on a fundamental level while women also love men on a fundamental level. Can't you even understand something so simple?"

Rentaro made a face like he was totally played for a fool, stunned on the spot.

What part of this person was actually joking and which were her honest opinions?

Sumire stood up with her back to him. She was apparently heading off to make coffee as usual. Looking out at the image of her back, dressed in a lab coat, Rentaro changed the subject to the secret hidden in his heart.

"Doctor, have you heard of the Black Swan Project?"

"No, I haven't."

Sumire casually added water to the pot and pressed the electric stove's switch. Keeping the same posture, she added:

"But judging from the fact that it's named after the black swan, perhaps there might be some connection to the black swan theory."

"Black swan theory?"

With her back to Rentaro, Sumire casually poured instant coffee powder into the water from a can while starting to explain:

"People originally believed that all birds called swans were white, but after black swans were discovered in Australia, a huge uproar was raised amongst ornithologists. In the world that originally believed all swans to be white, no one could predict the existence of black swans."

"Thereafter, the term 'black swan theory' was coined to describe phenomena where people suffer losses and are caught unprepared by what they deemed to be impossible due to excessive adherence to long-term predictions made according to common sense. Nothing is absolute in this world to begin with. Uncertainty is abundant everywhere. Making predictions as though all factors were known carries an extremely high risk.

"However, this theory can also be considered a warning against human nature. A prediction like 'since these fields have produced bumper crops for a decade continuously, this area will be submerged in a flood' would be considered nonsense, wouldn't it?

"Take for example a great panic event that theoretically should only happen once every couple tens of thousand years, but occurred with frequency on the level of decades, an inconceivable earthquake causing a meltdown at a nuclear power plant, or the like—"

"—Viral parasites suddenly appearing, driving humanity towards the brink of destruction?"

Sumire turned around with a grin on her lips.

"Precisely. I never expected you to comprehend so quickly, my little assistant."

Rentaro looked down at his hands.

Black Swan Project—For some reason, he felt a sense of foreboding.

Rentaro began to regret. Very likely, he might have gotten himself into a situation far more dangerous than imagined. He should have forced Suibara to spill the details last night.

Confirming the time, Rentaro saw that there was still some time before the agreed rendezvous.

"Doctor, I've got one more question. Does the term 'New World Creation Plan' ring any bells for you?"

Sumire turned her head back in surprise. Judging from this reaction, Rentaro concluded something must be up.

New World Creation Plan and New Human Creation Plan—The similarity in the two names could not be ignored the instant he heard Suibara mention them.

The kettle boiled, accompanied by a shrill whistling as the lid shook and clattered.

"Where did you hear that from?"

"Information provided by a client."

"How much do you know?"

"Virtually nothing. That's why I came to ask you, Doctor."

Fearing eavesdropping devices, Suibara deliberated decided to talk at a different location. He had looked exceptionally nervous. The New World Creation Plan and the Black Swan Project—It was probably correct to deem these two as so dangerous that they must confronted with caution.

Sumire rested her chin on her hand to think deeply for a while.

"I have told you before the reason why the New Human Creation Plan was scrapped, haven't I?"

"Uh—I remember it was terminated because it was too costly."

"Indeed. Cursed Children are born naturally at no cost but every soldier like you requires pouring in massive funds."

Sumire slowly poured coffee into two beakers while checking out Rentaro from head to foot.

"You are the billion yen boy, Rentaro."

I see, so that's how the plan died in infancy. Costing so much for one person, mass production would be total delusion.

Sumire continued:

"But had Cursed Children not appeared, the New Human Creation Plan would have entered the next phase, namely, the so-called New World Creation Plan. Oh right, simply stated, the New World Creation Plan is simply the complete version of the New Human Creation Plan."

"Complete version...?"

"Indeed. You, Kagetane Hiruko and parts of Tina's body have used super fibers, artificial organs, metallic skin, etc, all state-of-the-art technology. However, the New World Creation Plan aims to go even further, to replace more than half of the body with machinery, finally extending to the entire body apart from the brain."

"Hold on a sec!"

Rentaro hastily interrupted.

"Doctor, you mentioned before that the success rate of mechanization surgery is very low, right? If its applications were expanded in scope..."

Sumire sat down on a chair with a slightly embarrassed look. Staring up at what now seemed like a blinding incandescent bulb, she said:

"At least theoretically, it's not zero. The creatures known as scientists always like to take on challenges so long as chances are not zero."

"...Doctor, you were a medical practitioner before becoming a researcher, right?"

"Yes. But the poison named curiosity has an instant effect on scientists. Curiosity doesn't just kill cats."

Sumire slid one of the beakers over.

Holding the beaker in both hands, Rentaro looked at the black liquid inside. The heat gradually spread to his palm.

"What the heck is going on? Didn't the New World Creation Plan end before it started? Why did this term appear from my client's mouth..."

"I'd like to know the answer to that question too. Although I was the top director of the New Human Creation Plan, I never heard about the New World Creation Plan getting the go ahead. But then again, hmm... This might be related to *that incident* perhaps."

"That incident?"

Sumire made a look of deep thought again before answering:

"To be honest, a man was murdered recently at the New National Theater. Name: Kenji Houbara, age: thirty-five, stabbed in the chest while watching his favorite opera. Death was instantaneous. Simultaneously on the same day, Saya Takamura, a twenty-eight-year-old woman was visited at home by someone who killed her using a weapon that was ostensibly a shotgun. Furthermore, on the same day as well, Giichi Ebihara, a fifty-three-year-old man was killed by a sniper rifle shot while traveling on the bullet train."

"Three on the same day is too..."

"No, that isn't where the issue lies. The three victims had something in common."

Sumire first drank a sip of coffee before saying:

"Kenji Houbara and Saya Takamura were both survivors among the supersoldiers of the New Human Creation Plan."

"What!?"

Glancing at the dumbfounded Rentaro with narrowed eyes, Sumire crossed her legs and tilted her beaker slightly.

"Those two were both my patients. Honestly, I was quite surprised too. I know them very well. If possible, I really didn't want to inform you. That two former soldiers from the New Human Creation Plan were targeted and killed... They were murdered systematically. Unlike you, they had participated directly in the Gastrea War. Tired of fighting, they chose to retire after the war."

Rentaro had heard Sumire mention before that many of the supersoldiers with nowhere to go had switched careers to become CivSecs. However, some of them did not choose this path.

With her chin supported on a hand, Sumire cast her gaze as though looking out afar.

"Since they chose a peaceful way of life, I ought to give them my blessing. But looking at things now, there was apparently a serpent trying to instigate them. This guy."

Sumire took out a document from among the folders scattered on the table.

It looked like an autopsy report. Written on the first page was the name of Giichi Ebihara and a personal profile.

"Who's this guy?"

"A high-ranking official in Public Security, apparently."

Public Security referred to the Public Security Bureau. This bureau was in charge of defending "national" security by engaging in various activities including the containment of extremists and ultraconservatives, and even exposing the conspiracies of international terrorism. Their manner of investigation was always shrouded in mystery and were said to resemble gendarmerie or spy agencies of the past.

"Why would Public Security get targeted?"

"It looks like Ebihara was secretly approaching the other two who were leading retired lives, asking them to engage in what resembled spying work. The reason why I say 'it looks like' is because there is no evidence proving that the dead Ebihara had connections with the two retired soldiers. Only the victims know the truth. This speculation comes from Ebihara's secretary who saw him rendezvous secretly with Houbara. While eavesdropping, the term 'New World Creation Plan' came up, but the secretary still has no idea what the two of them were talking about."

"In other words, these three were murdered because..."

"I dare not jump to conclusions, but they probably knew something that they shouldn't have."

A deafening silence instantly shrouded the entire basement room. The humid basement air stroked Rentaro's neck.

Sumire's pale arm, whose veins were clearly visible, reached for another document on the table.

"By the way, Rentaro, has anyone related to the police come to look for trouble with Tina?"

"No... What's going on?"

"Honestly, I am quite concerned about this incident, which is why I have asked Miori to help gather information. Kenji Houbara was killed in the theater without eyewitnesses. The knife used for murder also had no fingerprints, but a faint sweet fragrance was apparently lingering on the murder weapon. The shotgun ammunition used to kill Saya Takamura was a twelve gauge anti-personnel round. Similarly, there were no eyewitnesses. Finally, there is the sniping incident on the bullet train. The bullet used to kill Ebihara is a type of powerful sniper bullet called Lapua Magnum. I am not too familiar with firearms but when the murder happened, the bullet train was traveling at the high speed of 200 kmh. No matter how you wrap your mind around it, sending a sniper bullet accurately through the window into the deceased's brain is totally unbelievable, right?"

Only then did Rentaro realize why Tina was specifically mentioned.

"Hold on a sec, Doctor! Tina is not the culprit."

"I don't believe it either. But if searching for someone with such superhuman skills, by the process of elimination, Tina will be listed as a suspect eventually."

Impossible, Tina would never do something like that.

"Although Tina is under Her Highness Seitenshi's special consideration and sentenced to what simply amounts to protective custody, do not forget that she was originally a severe criminal in an abortive attempt to assassinate the head of state. If she gets framed, execution by firing squad is unavoidable."

".....Don't scare me. Supposing that kind of professional killer really existed, there still isn't a necessary link with the New World Creation Plan, right? And even if they existed, I won't be a match since I'm an older model, right?"

Rentaro had defeated Kagetane, Tina and Aldebaran before but he definitely did not think his own power surpassed those opponents. Rather, he scraped by each time on the slimmest of margins, obtaining victory by relying on miracles.

Comprehending what Rentaro was trying to say, Sumire sighed in exasperation.

"Looks like you seem to be misunderstanding something. Your prosthetic limbs actually have plenty of room for growth."

For an instant, Rentaro was stunned, unable to understand what Sumire was saying.

"R-Really?"

Seeing Rentaro's face suddenly draw near, Sumire leisurely spread her hands.

"Of course. You are the supreme result out of all the soldiers I created and that includes your potential. You seem to be making full use of the prosthetic eye and limbs, but if I had to comment on bringing out the full power of my initial designs, you still have a long way to go. Take your prosthetic eye for example."

Sumire pointed at Rentaro, prompting him to lightly touch his left eye where an artificial eye had been implanted.

"Your prosthetic eye is equipped with a limiter circuit that prevents your rate of thought from exceeding a certain upper limit."

"W-Why?"

"Because you will end up seeing too many things. Currently, you are still stuck on the level of calculating distances and future enemy positions or slowing down the perception of time, but frankly speaking, there is room for improvement. During clinical trials, several patients were implanted with artificial eyes like yours but without the limiter circuit. In the end, none of those people returned."

"What you mean by returning is...?"

"The instant the prosthetic eye is released, intense fluctuations appeared in the brainwaves, finally flatlining at zero. In other words, I am unsure what exactly they saw. Things with unpredictable results cannot be used in service, hence, the solution of adding a limiter circuit was used. Although there are many practical techniques involving uncertainty that cannot be properly observed, such as the reading and writing of hard disks or the thermal expansion of internal combustion engines in vehicles, in the domain of human life and ethics, the higher-ups suddenly became cowardly."

"That's only natural. Given the case, if they still ignored it, that would be equivalent to a blatant crime."

"A blatant crime huh... I see, so I'm the villain here?"

"A shade of gray extremely close to black. That's the feeling."

Sumire went hmph as though she found it boring.

"You've become more and more adept with words. But this limiter circuit might have been the correct choice. A reduction in calculation speed produced a corresponding decrease in strain on the user's brain. You should remember this term: Terminal Horizon, the other side of one two-thousandths of a second."

"Terminal Horizon?"

"Indeed. Your prosthetic eye uses your anger, sadness and other emotions to adjust its level of ability. Whenever you activate the prosthetic eye, you feel as though time flows slower, right? However, time isn't actually slowing down. Rather, the powerful computer inside the eye and linked to your brain is increasing your rate of thinking, which is why it feels like time has slowed down in comparison. The so-called one two-thousandths of a second—simply stated, when things slow down to the point when one second in the real world feels like two thousand seconds, that is the limit. Every patient who exceeded this limit was unable to return due to brain damage."

Rentaro was utterly shocked.

Even in the Kagetane fight when he was certain his prosthetic eye had calculated the fastest, it was at most one fiftieth of a second. Of course, in burst situations, the value could have exceeded a hundredth of a second.

—But a factor of two thousand? Am I that far from the absolute limit?

Nevertheless, this was also good news at the same time. Rentaro quickly understood that. Enju Aihara, Tina Sprout and Kisara Tendo—In order not to allow himself to fall behind these powerful members of the Tendo Civil Security Company, he must approach this limit of the Terminal Horizon as much as possible. Surely this was beneficial to himself.

Even if he was unable to use a sniper rifle to his satisfaction, he still showed strengths in other areas.

Crossing her legs the other way, Sumire continued:

"Let's get back to the main topic. You are bound to client confidentiality so I won't ask you that person's name. But first, you should protect that person's life as much as possible and find a way to hide your client. Since this person holds the same secret as the three who were killed, this client is in danger too."

I really should head over to the appointed meeting place with Suibara immediately. Thinking this, Rentaro was about to get up.

"One final thing—"

Sumire's sharp gaze pierced him.

"—One issue still hasn't reached a conclusion. How do you intend to handle Kisara's matter?"

Rentaro froze.

"Nothing, I don't intend to do anything."

"Even if Kisara were to be taken away by another man, you would simply watch from the side in chagrin?"

Rentaro stood up from his chair and stared straight at Sumire.

"Doctor... You probably heard about what happened between Miss Kisara and Kazumitsu earlier, right?"

"Yes..."

After the Third Kantō Battle ended, Kisara Tendo had killed her paternal half-brother, Kazumitsu Tendo—and in an extremely cruel manner too.

"I, uh... I love Miss Kisara. Originally, I was willing to do anything for her sake. But after that incident, I came to understand. Miss Kisara only survived by relying completely on her hatred for the Tendos."

Ever since her parents were eaten by Gastrea in front of her, Kisara had acquired aphasia due to losing all meaning in life. But a certain incident suddenly happening on a certain day then spurred her to apprentice herself under the tutelage of Sukekiyo Tendo and train in swordsmanship with hellbent determination.

What sustained her heartbeat and the will to live on was the wish to send to hell those who had destroyed her life. Only that.

"In the year after the Tendo Civil Security Company opened for business, due to all the happy times, I thought she had already forgotten about that. Looks like I was wrong."

'Do you still not understand? Justice is no good. You cannot oppose evil by relying on justice alone. Instead, you must rely on "absolute evil" that is even more evil. That is the kind of power I possess.'

Rentaro gritted his teeth and looked down.

"She won't listen to me at all..."

While recounting to Sumire, Rentaro also organized the thoughts in his mind, confirming how he ought to regard the marriage interview between Hitsuma and Kisara.

"Ever since I was handed over to be taken care of in the Tendo household ten years ago, I've been so indebted to Miss Kisara that I cannot repay her even with a lifetime. I am willing to do anything as long as she will obtain happiness. Doctor, I've decided. I hope Miss Kisara can understand that there are many things to live for in this world apart from vengeance. For that reason, I..."

Rentaro gasped. Because didn't the decision he was making this very instant imply bidding farewell to the feelings he had accumulated nonstop over the past ten years?

Sumire made a surprised look.

"So you intend to back out voluntarily by prioritizing Kisara's happiness first? Do you really understand, Rentaro? Suppose you simply wish for Kisara to be happy, that means you must keep suppressing your emotions henceforth. This is something you cannot quit halfway, can you swear on it?"

Rentaro closed his eyes. Under his eyelids surfaced the beautiful image of Kisara smiling shyly with her hand over her mouth.

"I swear, Doctor."

"Even if Kisara progresses smoothly with her suitor, finally obtaining happiness through marriage and children—Kisara still might not forget the matter of vengeance. Atrophied physical abilities are quick to recover, but decay of the mind is incurable. Impossible to recover ever again. Suppose it is too late to rectify Kisara and you are responsible for eliminating her, can you do it?"

Rentaro stood up with his back to Sumire.

"Doctor, I need to go. I still have a meeting with the client."

He left as though fleeing but his legs felt extremely heavy while walking on the staircase.

—I am willing to do anything for Miss Kisara... But...

He noticed that his breathing had grown quick and very irregular. Almost subconsciously, he reached for his lower back.

He probably wanted to squeeze the handgun's grip hard with both hands as though praying to stabilize his irregular breathing.

However, his hand missed his target. Discovering that the usual calming weight was gone from his back, Rentaro frantically reached behind with both hands, but could not anything.

Rentaro's XD handgun was missing.

Impossible—He thought. Searching his pockets, he still could not find the gun. Did he lose it somewhere?

Due to the excessive rush this morning, he had not paid particular attention.

His conversation with Suibara instantly replayed in his mind.

'Sorry, but the evidence was stolen.'

'Stolen?'

'My home has been invaded a number of times lately and I lost many things. The evidence is one of them. So all I can do is a direct appeal as the witness. Apart from that, you're the only one I can trust.'

'Rentaro, those people have already judged you as someone related to me. I'm sorry for getting you involved, but you must take care.'

No way—Rentaro shook his head. Less than a day had elapsed since yesterday. No way the enemy's grasp could possibly have extended so rapidly. Besides, even if it was done by the "enemy" mentioned by Suibara, what was the point of stealing Rentaro's gun?

The appointed time was getting closer and closer.

Shaking his head to dispel the surging sense of unpleasant foreboding, Rentaro quickened his steps towards the building where they had agreed to meet at.

Part 5

Still under construction, the concrete of Magata Municipal Office was exposed, reflecting the night's pale white moonlight.

Obstructed by construction scaffolding, the moonlight illuminating the building projected complicated shadow patterns on the ground.

Someone was there with his hands in his pockets. It was Suibara kicking the floor.

He had arrived an hour before the appointed time because of an unhappy argument with his Initiator at home.

I should have chosen to meet in a busy crowded location instead, thought Suibara, but then he shook his head instantly. Under those conditions where eavesdropping could happen anywhere, it was impossible to discuss without worrying.

I just need to wait a short while longer—Suibara tried hard to comfort himself.

After exposing that project through Rentaro, everything would be over. Then he could rest assured and everything could proceed henceforth without trouble. All he had to do was wait a while longer—

Just at this moment, he looked back as he heard a series of thuds. Footsteps could be heard from the other side of the darkness.

First appeared a pair of shoes. The slanted moonlight produced a shadow next to the feet of the person approaching.

Looking at his cellphone, Suibara saw that there were still forty minutes before the appointed time.

Who could have expected him to be here already? What an impatient guy—Suibara smiled wryly while thinking he had no right to accuse that of others and deciding to run over happily.

"Hey, Renta—"

A gunshot was accompanied by a muzzle flash. At the same time, he felt an impact on his flank. The cellphone falling from his hand bounced off somewhere unknown due to the impact.

"Huh?"

For a moment, Suibara had no idea what happened.

Plink—Hearing the sound of a spent shell hitting the floor, he could feel heat coming from his flank as though getting scorched by a branding iron.

Suibara looked at his flank in trepidation. His shirt there was already dyed red.

"Ah... Guh...!"

The instant he realized he was shot, intense pain flooded his mind.

No, that person was not Rentaro.

The figure fired two shots consecutively while walking. These two shots penetrated Suibara's leg and chest. Unable to support himself anymore, he collapsed.

Unable to breathe. The instant he felt pain, something surged up from the depths of his stomach, causing him to vomit a massive amount of fresh blood on the spot. His body felt an extreme chill. Thinking he was going to die here without knowing anything, Suibara desperately wriggled his body like an inchworm, trying to escape the attacker.

However, this unsightly escape operation soon met its end.

Clong—He felt something pressed against the back of his head. Instinctively, he knew it was a gun's muzzle.

All sorts of happy memories surfaced in his mind like a slideshow as his tears overflowed. While breathing intermittently, stretching his hand out in the air, he firmly grasped the happiest memory of all—time spent with a certain girl—in his hand.

"Hotaru...!"

A shot rang out, illuminating the interior of the building for an instant. Finally, all that was left was the sound of a spent shell hitting the ground and the gunshot's echo lingering in the attacker's ear.

A hot and humid wind blew, shaking nearby trees.

The instant he arrived at the construction site of the Magata Municipal Office, Rentaro halted in his steps due to an unpleasant feeling. Then he looked up at the building.

In the sky above this half-constructed building, a clear August moon was shining brightly.

There were still twenty minutes or so until the appointed time. Despite feeling that was a bit early, Rentaro still climbed up the stairs.

With Sumire's words of doubt from just before he left still lingering in his ear, he noticed his mind was spinning aimlessly and could only shake his head.

Arriving at the fourth floor as agreed, he found no one in the empty space.

Just to be safe, he shone his smartphone's flash and called out to the air:

"Hey, Sui—"

—bara. Just as he was about to call out, Rentaro instantly gasped from the smell of blood wafting into his nasal cavity.

His thoughts were instantly interrupted but he quickly raised his smartphone above his head to dispel the surrounding darkness.

He ended up finding a surprising amount of bloodstains and the legs of the man who had collapsed behind a pillar.

"Suibara!"

Rentaro rushed over but immediately fell into despair.

Suibara lay collapsed with a total of four shots on his flank, leg, right chest and back of the head. The gun wound on the back of his head was clearly fatal.

Suibara was dead. Yesterday, he was still breathing and able to joke around, the Suibara who traded retorts with Rentaro.

However, something even more frightening entered Rentaro's view.

"What, this is...!"

Placed on Suibara's back while he was sprawled face down was what should be the handgun that was the murder weapon.

Rentaro gingerly reached out.

Hold it—An alarm was sounding in his heart. This was already a *crime scene*. Your actions will only damage the scene.

The hot and humid air of the night brushed across his skin. Cold sweat slid down his face. Rentaro ignored his rationality's warning and reached out to hold the gun.

A four-inch slide with .40 carved on the left side of the gun. He knew this gun all too well.

The XD handgun manufactured by Springfield Armory. It had the same slide length as the gun Rentaro used. Same model and caliber too. Right now, there was no doubt at all that this gun had been used to murder Suibara.

Upon closer examination, Rentaro discovered minute scratches on the gun's frame and slide rail due to rough handling. Without question, this was the weapon that Rentaro had used during the battles against Kagetane Hiruko, Tina and Aldebaran.

The missing gun had shown up. And at the scene of Suibara's murder. Why?

At this very instant, Rentaro was suddenly illuminated by two beams of light. He covered his face due to the brightness hurting his eyes.

"Police! Freeze!"

Narrowing his eyes slightly to stare at the back of the light sources, he saw police officers in uniform. A chill instantly rushed along his spine.

"You've got it wrong! Hold on!"

"Drop the gun!"

Accompanied by a loud noise, a warning shot struck near Rentaro's feet.

Only then did Rentaro realize he was tightly gripping the murder weapon that had killed Suibara. Hastily, he threw the gun away.

A beam of light approached. He suddenly felt someone collide into him and then the intense pain of his arm getting twisted.

Subdued on the concrete without knowing a clue about the circumstances, he found his face smashed violently against the floor.

Hearing the sound of metallic friction, only then did he realize his wrists did not feel right.

Gritting his teeth, he looked back to see the dull glint of metal handcuffs applied firmly to his wrists.

"Apprehended!"

Rentaro closed his eyes forcefully.

—I've been framed!



Part 6

Rentaro slammed the steel table hard.

"Screw this, I didn't do it!"

"Stop lying. Who else was there apart from you!?"

"I was set up."

"The gun used to murder the victim was definitely yours. The rifling registered in the database also matches that of your gun. The evidence is rock solid. If you continue your denial, it'll just make the sentence harsher."

Impossible to communicate. Rentaro crossed his legs angrily and adjusted his position on the stool. He had been brought to this interrogation room where a tense atmosphere was hanging.

The monotonous steel-gray walls. A small stool. A pitifully cramped room without any decoration, almost devoid of anything that could be considered furniture.

For the past two hours, this futile question and answer had repeated for countless times. Rentaro had had enough already. Enju was probably starting to wonder why he was not home yet. Rentaro hoped she would not worry too much.

Why must he face this kind of treatment? He really wanted to get back soon. Being accused of a crime he had not committed at all, Rentaro was overcome with such a sense of setback that he almost wanted to beat up the police officer.

The interrogation room's door opened and the detective doing the interrogation straightened up.

A square and rugged face peered in from outside. Rentaro instantly felt as though someone was going to save him from this hell.

"Inspector Tadashima."

Shigetoku Tadashima. A homicide detective, ranked inspector.

Rentaro had met him many times at crime scenes and Tadashima understood his character to a certain extent.

Surely he could testify that Rentaro could not possibly have committed such a crime.

But in the next second, Rentaro realized he was too naive.

"You are Rentaro Satomi, yes?"

"What?"

On the bold square face, the pair of eyes narrowed like deep cracks. Even though he was not guilty, Rentaro shuddered, intimidated by the powerful pressure from Tadashima's glare.

This finally convinced Rentaro. Tadashima had arrived here to interrogate "Rentaro Satomi the homicide suspect" rather than to have a conversation with "Rentaro Satomi the CivSec."

Hoping for his compassion at this stage would be as futile an attempt as tearfully begging for a pardon in front of the guillotine.

Tadashima had the young detective stand while he sat down opposite Rentaro. The detective who had been doing the interrogation stood behind Rentaro and kept pacing back and forth as intimidation.

Tadashima leaned forward, pressing his weight on the steel table. The table creaked.

"Please explain from the start your actions on the night of the homicide."

"I've already explained many times."

"I didn't hear it."

This unreasonable answer made Rentaro want to pounce but in the end, he still endured desperately.

Asking for another explanation of what happened that day in order to pick out contradictions in the suspect's testimony was a common police technique.

Rentaro tried hard to stay calm and recount what had transpired.

"That gun is apparently yours, right?"

"Didn't I say so already? Someone stole it. I didn't notice at first."

"If you didn't notice, how do you know it was stolen? Didn't it occur to you that you could have dropped it somewhere?"

Feeling that things were not going well, Rentaro broke out in cold sweat.

"That's because... In hindsight, my gun was taken to commit a crime, which is why I say it was stolen. But back then, it didn't occur to me that it was theft."

"Losing your handgun is a serious issue. Why didn't you report immediately to the police?"

"Like I said, I didn't know it was stolen at the time. I thought I might be able to find it at home or in the office."

"When did you notice the gun was gone?"

"Uh... Just before meeting up with Suibara."

"Hmph, right before you met the deceased. What perfect timing for your discovery."

Tadashima clearly threw a gaze of suspicion.

Damn it. If time machines existed, Rentaro really wanted to warn his past self to hurry and report the missing gun to the police.

"Hey, Inspector Tadashima, when Suibara came to hire the Tendo Civil Security Company, he was already scared of getting killed. Besides, there's no compelling motive for me to kill Suibara."

"Can anyone corroborate your claim?"

"What are you saying?"

Tadashima flipped open his notebook, licking his thumb before turning the pages.

"Before coming here, I already questioned those at the Tendo Civil Security Company briefly."

Rentaro instantly forgot to breathe. In other words, Kisara, Tina and Enju already knew he was arrested.

"The deceased Suibara Kihachi definitely visited you to commission a job. Your CEO can testify to that. However, she did not listen to the important contents of request."

"Because I was the only one he trusted and he wasn't willing to talk to anyone else."

"Can anyone prove what you're saying?"

"Suibara and I were the only people at Tendo Civil Security at the time. Suibara drove everyone else out first—"

"—Meaning that apart from you, no one heard the deceased's request, is that so?"

"...What on earth are you trying to say?"

Tadashima's gaze fell on his notebook as he started to turn the pages again:

"This is the testimony I obtained. Your Initiator returned from shopping to find you clearly acting abnormally. You even refused to have dinner with everyone else, going off to hide somewhere."

"That's because..."

Rentaro almost blurted the truth out but then he quickly suspected that it was not appropriate here, instantly falling into silence.

"Why? Try me."

"It's because, something else..."

"You wish to remain silent?"

"No. My CEO told me she was going to a marriage interview. After that, I found it painful to stay in her presence..."

Tadashima made a look of incomprehension.

"You're not in love with that female CEO, are you?"

Rentaro looked down, his cheeks burning.

A laugh of mockery came from behind.

"That's a great excuse."

"What do you mean by that?"

Rentaro looked back to glare viciously at the detective behind him, instantly eliciting a shout of "face forward" that forced him to turn his head back. With elbows on the table, Tadashima pressed his palms together and looked at him.

"Actually, that's what we wanted to talk about. There is no request from Suibara Kihachi in the first place."

"What?"

"You were blackmailed by the deceased. Although it is unknown what secret of yours he had gotten his hands on, you were childhood friends so finding your weakness shouldn't be hard. Seeing as you are the Tokyo Area's savior in the Third Kantō Battle and the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, Suibara decided to hit you for some cash. Due to Suibara's threats, you were greatly shaken and thus had no mood to eat with your colleagues. Am I right?"

"After deciding to get rid of Suibara, you tricked him to the predetermined location and shot him to death. In the end, someone heard the gunshots and the police immediately arrived. This modus operandi of yours is really stupid."

"F-Fuck this shit!"

What nonsense was that? Tadashima's version was so far from the truth.

However, Rentaro was indeed the only one who heard Suibara's request. After that, it was also true that Rentaro hastily left the office because he did not want to face Kisara.

He never expected those facts would happen to fit together as ingredients for a misunderstanding...

Cold sweat flowed down Rentaro's face.

"...Hey Inspector. I was personally involved in the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident and the Third Kantō Battle. Do you really think that someone like me will murder people?"

Rentaro prayed in his heart. Now that he had lost Tadashima as an ally, his fate was entirely left in the hands of others.

But Tadashima coldly shook his head.

"You are being interrogated precisely because the truth is unknown. Criminals are criminals. Our job is to arrest them. I've seen more than enough self-proclaimed 'good people' who insisted they were possessed by the devil when they committed their crimes."

Rentaro shook his head helplessly.

"I didn't kill the guy."

"In other words, you deny the charge?"

"Of course. Why do I have to admit something I didn't do? I want a lawyer. You guys should have legal aid available, right?"

Tadashima sighed lightly, his ice-cold gaze piercing Rentaro.

"Rentaro Satomi, we are detaining you. We have already applied to the court for an extension to your detention period. You will stay in the detention room for now."

Part 7

"What a disaster out of the blue, Rentaro."

On the other side of the reinforced acrylic glass, Sumire Muroto was scratching the front of her hair, muttering gloomily.

"Ever since I got involved with you, I've been dragged out of the basement an increasing number of times. On my way here today, the sun scorched me mercilessly, almost incinerating me to ash."

Rentaro wanted to laugh a couple of times but his expression was a bit stiff.

"Are you a bit tired?"

Rentaro shrugged and replied:

"More healthy, I'd say. At least living here, I get three meals for free a day and afternoon naps."

A surprised expression surfaced on Sumire's face but she quickly grinned.

"Now that's the spirit, boy. If you use this kind of vitality to break out of prison, things would be much simpler."

Hearing a dry cough, Rentaro looked to find the prison guard sitting on a chair, making a gesture.

Completely unrepentant, Sumire shrugged.

Rentaro was meeting Sumire at the visiting room. He had already been detained for a week.

"When I first heard you were arrested, I thought you were caught for licking a young girl's bottom out of excessive lust, but to think that wasn't the case. I never expected it to be murder. On various levels, you always act in ways that completely transcend my expectations."

"Like I said, I didn't kill anyone—"

"You must have talked to the lawyer. What came out of it?"

"Nothing much, he said I'm definitely getting prosecuted. Chances of winning the trial are very low."

"Are you surprised?"

"No."

Rentaro was lying.

Somewhere deep in his heart, he still believed. Since he had not killed anyone, surely someone would understand and uphold justice on his behalf.

But it did not take long for hope to turn into despair.

After going through harsh interrogation and the court approved an extension of the detention period, Rentaro became an inmate who must wear handcuffs with a rope around his waist during movement, repeating his account of that night's events dozens of times to the detectives and the assistant prosecutor. Every time he sorrowfully lamented "I didn't do it" unnecessarily, he was rudely interrupted with "Just answer the question." Insisting on his innocence, his voice became hoarse from screaming.

His speculation that Suibara was eliminated by a certain assassination organization was dismissed with derision.

Somewhere in Rentaro's haggard mind surfaced the resigned notion that it would be easier to just confess to the crime. And not just once or twice either.

"Your chances will be different if I defended you, but unfortunately, becoming a lawyer requires a convoluted procedure and getting licensed as well."

"You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Does the law forbid doctors from being lawyers?"

"Uh, no."

"Besides, I've already read the entire compendium of laws. Thick, heavy and boring, they took half an hour just for me to memorize everything."

"Thoughts?"

"Written in them are human desires. What an astounding amount of human desires."

"By the way—" Sumire changed the subject and looked towards Rentaro's chest. "Enju is probably visiting regularly," she suddenly said.

Her gaze was directed towards the chest of the loose tracksuit that Rentaro was wearing which was clumsily patched with a rabbit design. Rentaro touched it with hand, feeling the fabric's smooth texture. This was the tracksuit Enju had delivered to him.

When Rentaro was arrested, his uniform and belt had been taken away at the detention room on grounds of preventing the suspect from committing suicide by hanging or swallowing buttons.

His prosthetic limbs were supposed to be taken off too, but due to being disguised by artificial skin, so long as Rentaro kept silent about them, there was not need to worry about them getting confiscated for now.

Previous visits only had Enju. Neither Tina nor Kisara had appeared at all.

"Doctor, how's Tina?"

Sumire shook her head.

"The police still hasn't released her?"

Soon after Rentaro was arrested, Tina was taken away by the police.

Just as Sumire feared earlier, apart from Tina, the police was unable to find any other suspect capable of the godly feat of sniping a target through the window of a bullet train traveling at 200 kilometers per hour.

According to Enju, Tina was taken away by the police as an important person of interest despite a clear lack of reason. She had not returned ever since. Unfortunately, Tina had no alibi for that day, which was also one of the reasons why she was suspected.

"At this rate, Ebihara's sniping case might develop into a case with you as the mastermind and Tina as the perpetrator."

"Fucking ridiculous!"

Ignoring Rentaro's violent swearing, Sumire calmly supported her elbows on the table, and rested her chin over her overlapping palms.

"Indeed, it is extremely ridiculous. However, when the organisms known as humans encounter unreasonable things, they attempt to find methods to rationalize, no matter how contrive, so that they can accept them. You were standing at the murder scene and even holding the murder weapon. Likewise, a sniping incident occurred that was virtually impossible for a normal human, and there was only one possible person who might have done it. In the end, although how things are judged boils down to 'only God knows,' but it's not difficult to predict the solemn faces on the jurors after they listen to the case during the trial."

"....."

"Let's talk about something even more unpleasant. The instant you are pronounced guilty, your CivSec license will be suspended according to regulations. The official reason is that criminals are forbidden from holding licenses. More terrifying is the fact that starting from the moment you lose your license and CivSec status, Enju will be taken away and handed over to the IISO."

"No way..."

"It is all thanks to the CivSec license that you are allowed to take care of a ten-year-old girl of no blood relations and live with her. After losing the license, of course your life of cohabitation with Enju will face a crisis."

"In that case, Enju can just quit being an Initiator."

In the Tokyo Area, Initiators were gathered by recruiting voluntary talent and could quit according to their personal will. However—Sumire shook her head.

"You'd better not place your hopes on that. Once Enju quits civil security, the IISO will stop providing the inhibiting agent. For Enju's current state, that would be fatal."

"Damn it. Isn't this forcing people on a road to perdition—"

Rentaro slammed the table, causing the prison guard to glare harshly at him.

Sumire rose up from her chair.

"Anyway, you should think carefully, Rentaro. The next part is quite crucial."

Saying that, she left the room.

What should I do? Rentaro asked himself. However, he could not find a clear answer.

As long as he was locked up in here, there was no way to take action to reverse the unfavorable situation.

Dropping prosecution due to a lack of evidence, this would be Rentaro's last hope.

Slowing down his quickened breathing, Rentaro clasped his hands together hard as though he were praying.

I can't get prosecuted. After all, I didn't kill the guy.

The prison guard hurried Rentaro but he still remained there without moving.

Two days later, Rentaro Satomi was formally charged by the assistant prosecutor, thereby turning from a suspect to a defendant.

Part 8

Once the charge was confirmed, Rentaro spent every day in depression.

In the beginning, feeling it was unreasonable, he entered a mad rage and was subdued by court security. Then he was struck by an onslaught of deep exhaustion.

Ever since his arrest and detainment, he had not seen Tina. According to the indirect information passed to him, her position was not optimistic at all.

Originally, the ten-year-old Tina Sprout was supposed to be spared from punishment according to juvenile law, but the prosecution seemed excessively eager to send Tina to her execution. Using the reason that she was not human and hence juvenile law did not apply, they coerced her to participate in the harsh process of evidence collection.

Rentaro felt extremely disappointed.

Wasn't the so-called law meant to be the weak's final bastion? At some unknown point in time, civilization had regressed back to the era of rampant witch hunts. No, it would be more accurate to say that it was human hearts that have regressed.

Enju visited Rentaro almost every day.

Pressing her face against the visiting room's glass, bringing her entire body near, she offered various consoling words including "you'll be okay for sure," "you never did anything bad in the first place, right, Rentaro?", "I shall let you touch my chest after you get out safely", etc.

Rentaro would nonchalantly answer her "thank you," "of course," "no thanks." However, in his heart, he felt deep gratitude towards her.

Without Enju to comfort him, Rentaro would probably have been crushed by despair in no time at all, suffering irrevocable psychological trauma.

Supposing there was no acrylic glass separating them, Rentaro really wanted to pick up Enju in his arms and smother her with kisses. Realizing he was harboring such unbelievable feelings towards a ten-year-old, Rentaro felt quite distraught as well.

Today, Rentaro was sitting in the visiting room again.

However, the person across from him was neither Sumire nor Enju.

For quite a while, Rentaro fell into silence because he had no idea what to say. Opposite him, it was the same for the girl in the black sailor-style uniform.

The wall clock's second hand ticked mechanically. When three minutes of the precious visiting time had elapsed, the girl finally spoke:

"Sorry, I originally wanted to come sooner..."

"It's nothing, don't let it weigh on your mind, Miss Kisara."

Having heard from Enju already, Rentaro managed to barely feign calmness.

Locked at the detention facility, Rentaro had no way of knowing, of course, but after his arrest and Tina was taken away, a huge number of reporters naturally gathered around Kisara.

As much as Rentaro respected Kisara's smart and bold personality from the bottom of his heart, he also knew at the same time that she was just a sixteen-year-old girl with rich and sensitive emotions.

Furthermore, Tina and Rentaro's absence meant that Tendo Civil Security currently had no Initiator-Promoter pairs that could be sent on missions.

Clients were few to come by to begin with and now they had to rejected due to the company's state of affairs. This too was heard from Enju. Apart from that, burdened by severe mental exhaustion and in order to seek emotional support, Kisara had gone off to confide in Hitsuma with whom she had gotten re-acquainted during the marriage interview. This too was mentioned by Enju...

"Miss Kisara, what is the result of the marriage interview?"

Rentaro asked gently, causing Kisara's face to brighten up a bit.

"Uh, Mr. Hitsuma is a good man. He works in the police and is willing to assist with what you and Tina are facing..."

Pausing here, Kisara looked down.

"Hey Satomi, you must have other things you're more curious about, right?"

"Such as?"

"Why I didn't visit until now, or the like?"

"No... You must be very busy, right?"

Despite denying his curiosity, Rentaro still felt his heart pounding hard.

He was very curious. Unbearably curious.

No matter how busy, taking time out for one visit should not be that hard, right? Could it be related to Hitsuma—However Rentaro's pitiful pride as a man absolutely forbade him from asking something so disgraceful.

"Satomi, I've been thinking a lot. I felt that I should not meet you with a mindset of hesitation until a clear answer came out. However, I reached the answer at last."

Kisara looked up, staring at Rentaro in her straight sitting posture.

"I am willing to do anything for you, Satomi. I will hire the best lawyer for you. Don't be concerned about the question of money. Tina will be acquitted. We will still run Tendo Civil Security with all four of us together. Even if it might take some time, I don't mind. This is my answer."

With a flood of emotions bursting in his chest, Rentaro stared at Kisara without saying a word.

Seeing as the Tendo Civil Security Company was so impoverished that only sweet potatoes could be served for dinner, where would all that money come from? Kisara's assertion probably stemmed from her intention to use the funds for Miwa Girls Private Academy's tuition and to liquidate all the stocks and options held in her name—No, even then, there should not be enough money.

If they lose the case by any chance, total expenses could expand to astronomical numbers, dealing a devastating blow to the Tendo Civil Security Company. But even so, she still chose this path.

Rentaro felt deeply ashamed for having his thoughts mired in the the mud of Hitsuma and Kisara's relationship.

Ugly jealousy dissipated at the same time. A sense of love surged in his chest. Rentaro wanted to break through the window's isolation to instantly hold Kisara in his embrace.

However, a hollow warning sounded in his mind, restraining his actions.

'Do you really understand, Rentaro? Suppose you simply wish for Kisara to be happy, that means you must keep suppressing your emotions henceforth. This is something you cannot quit halfway, can you swear on it?'

Those were the words that the director of forensic pathology had used when questioning him in the basement of Magata University. How should he answer that question?

Kisara believed that Rentaro was very precious to her. This was fully expressed by her words just now.

Rentaro closed his eyes then slowly opened them.

—Enough, I shouldn't ask for anything more.

"Miss Kisara, I really appreciate the gesture, but I can't accept it."

"W-Why?"

Ignoring the surprised Kisara, Rentaro looked at his own knees and said indifferently:

"Shouldn't you calm down a bit? I've been listening silently to you talk on your own for a while now. You are free to indulge yourself in the feelings of being a solitary heroine, but I don't think I need your help."

"What are you saying..."

Kisara widened her eyes, dumbfounded.

"I said it's not necessary. Besides, wasn't your marriage interview going very well?"

Rentaro changed his tone of voice and spoke as though scolding her:

"Isn't it time to go, Miss Kisara? I can't take care of you like before anymore. Let Hitsuma be responsible for protecting you from now on."

Kisara Tendo's happiness was impossible to actualize by Rentaro's side. This was the unmistakable conclusion.

After all, Kisara would instantly be reminded of the tragedy ten years ago whenever she saw Rentaro's artificial eye and limbs, thus strengthening her conviction for vengeance.

In other words, from Kisara's perspective, Rentaro's existence was equivalent to a catalyst to her painful memories of how her parents were devoured by the Gastrea.

Since his existence only stood as an obstacle to her happiness, there was no other solution apart from physical separation between them, between Kisara Tendo and Rentaro Satomi. In order to let her forget revenge and live on properly, this was the last and only way.

If possible, Rentaro also hoped he could be the one to bring Kisara happiness. It would be wonderful if he could be the one to teach her all the joys of being a woman, helping her ascend the pinnacle of happiness, but unfortunately, that was beyond him.

Kisara made an offended look in response to Rentaro's cold attitude and lifted her chin up in displeasure.

"What is this? Fine, Mr. Hitsuma is a good man. Unlike you, Satomi, he treasures me. Also unlike you, his family is very wealthy. Furthermore, unlike you, he is very tall. Mr. Hitsuma has already proposed to me. Although you may not know it, Satomi, I am extremely popular with the opposite sex, hmph."

"I see. Good for you."

"What is with that attitude of yours?"

For some reason, Kisara seemed displeased with Rentaro's cold response from the bottom of her heart.

"Satomi, are you fine with a guilty verdict? You didn't kill the victim, right, Satomi? This is too unreasonable."

Changing the subject, Kisara looked down with a red face, rubbing her thighs together awkwardly.

"I am unable to fight for extended periods of time due to my chronic disease of diabetes. You know that, right? C- Consequently, I still need you to protect me in the future, Satomi. To be honest, I am a very weak girl."

Rentaro could not help but shake his head.

"Please, Miss Kisara, don't come here ever again."

"Why? Why must you say that? Do you hate me?"

Rentaro stared straight at Kisara.

—Thank you, Miss Kisara. Ever since I was adopted by the Tendo family ten years ago, I've felt thankful to you, Miss Kisara. Although my limbs were sacrificed when your parents were eaten by the Gastrea, the fact that I was able to protect you stands as my minuscule but one and only pride.

I love you, Miss Kisara.

"Please don't visit me again. I don't want to see your face and that's that."

The chair made a sound as Kisara stood up violently, covering her mouth with both hands, tears bursting out of her eyes and sliding down her cheeks.

"What is the meaning of this... What on earth."

No matter how she tried to wipe, tears kept flowing nonstop out of her eyes.

Even Kisara must not have expected herself to cry at this time. Going "Oh dear?", she made a distraught look and instantly turned around, planning to burst out of the visiting room's door.

This for the best—Rentaro told himself.

Considering it was Hitsuma, he could definitely make Kisara happy.

Watching from behind as Kisara reached for the door handle, Rentaro insisted on seeing her off as his obligatory punishment.

After Kisara disappeared through the door, images of Tina, Enju, Rentaro and Kisara, the four of them gathered around a dining table, laughing and looking at one another, surfaced in his mind. Thinking that such times would no longer come again, Rentaro could not help but weep.

—Don't go, Miss Kisara.

"Save—"

Covering his mouth with both hands and closing his eyes, Rentaro desperately swallowed the words he had not finished.

Fortunately, Kisara did not stop walking. Left in the visiting room was only the rejecting sound of the hard door closing as well as cold silence.

Tears fell from the tip of his nose, a wet stain spreading on his pants.

The pain of forever losing the irreplaceable was making Rentaro sob at a suppressed volume.

Images of the Tendo Civil Security Company fracturing apart silently spread out in Rentaro's mind.

Part 9

"Why...?"

With lips slightly parted, Rentaro had asked "why?" so many times today that he had already lost count. He was looking at the towering building in Tokyo Area's first ward up ahead—The Sacred Residence.

Why was he here?

Thinking back, he should have been suspicious starting this morning when he was instructed to change into his uniform instead of the tracksuit. After all, back when he was first sent to the detention facility, the prison guards gave him a long lecture about belts and buttons being forbidden.

Two prison escort officers and the driver transferred Rentaro onto a station wagon. Then they drove along a route different from the usual one that went to the Public Prosecutor's Office. By this time, Rentaro finally realized that something was up. But without getting emotional about it, he simply accepted reality with indifference.

The view outside the wagon had lost all life and seemed very gloomy in his eyes.

Ever since Kisara's visit, Rentaro had dulled himself towards external stimuli, enwrapped in deep thought all the time.

He tried to carefully pick up those happy and joyful memories to immerse himself in them. However, despite Rentaro's desperate attempts to recall his memories at Tendo Civil Security, they were unexpectedly short.

"Hey, turn your body inwards. You will be seeing Her Highness Seitenshi."

His awareness brought back to reality, Rentaro tried hard to exile those unfocused thoughts, only regaining his senses suddenly when he finally understood the words spoken to him.

"Her Highness Seitenshi?"

After Rentaro did as ordered, the escort officer inserted a key into his handcuffs, allowing his hands to regain their freedom.

The rope tied to his waist like a leash was unfastened while the two officers escorted him, one leading the way with the other behind him.

Having apparently received notice beforehand, the security guards standing fiercely in front of the Sacred Residence saluted briefly before letting them pass.

After waiting in a reception room where there was an eagle statue and many trophies displayed, they were taken to a great hall.

The tall ceiling traced out the lines of arches while the polished floor was laid with mosaics. The marble columns towered in rows. Every ornament was beyond the scale of common human experience, making Rentaro wonder if he had accidentally intruded into a giant's home.

The Sacred Residence's exquisite and magnificent sights were impossible for the lead-gray walls of the interrogation room and detention facility to compare with. As a result, Rentaro felt his emotions brighten a bit.

"Hey you, take this."

Strangely enough, the escort officer said that while handing over to Rentaro the CivSec license that had been confiscated during his arrest.

"What's going on? What am I doing next?"

The escort officer did not answer.

Rentaro was simply given a light push on the back to make him stand in front of a great door, which then opened with a heavy sound as fluttering ribbons of light shone out from inside the door.

Walking inside, climbing the long and winding staircase to the very top, Rentaro saw Seitenshi rise from the throne where she was sitting to slowly approach him.

The two escort officers flanking him simply straightened their backs.

A wave of Seitenshi's hand brought panic to the escort officers sandwiching Rentaro.

"Your Highness Seitenshi, meeting the offender alone will be dangerous."

"None of your concern. Dismissed."

The troubled escort officers exchanged glances before reluctantly disappearing behind the door.

Hence, Rentaro and Seitenshi became the only two people remaining inside this vast space.

"It has been a while."

Seitenshi smiled with her greeting but hidden in her tone of voice was sorrow.

"Naturally. You're the head of state while I'm just a CivSec. We wouldn't meet in the first place unless there was a special situation."

"Indeed, it is a good thing if you put it that way. Since the CivSecs being idle implies that the world is at peace."

"That's right."

Rentaro's shoulders shook lightly while Seitenshi laughed demurely with her hand over her mouth. A light-hearted atmosphere was flowing between them.

"Why did you summon me?"

With her hands clasped together in front of her formal dress, Seitenshi straightened her standing posture.

"Mr. Satomi, have you any idea regarding the recent trends in public opinion?"

"I'm very sorry but I don't have access to television and newspapers in the detention facility."

"Public opinion believes that it is imperative to re-scrutinize the civil security companies that had fought with their lives to protect the Tokyo Area during the Third Kantō Battle. Caught red-handed and arrested at the scene of a murder, Mr. Satomi, you have become the spark for which this sort of public opinion has long been waiting."

"...You think I killed someone too?"

Seitenshi shook her head.

"I do not know. My position prevents me from judging."

"You are the head of state, right?"

"I am the highest authority in the executive branch of the government, but I cannot interfere with the judiciary. Besides, I must bear responsibility for the appointment of personnel. I placed my trust in you, Mr. Satomi, and greatly promoted your IP Rank on three occasions. Stemming from that, I am equally guilty for favoring you, Mr. Satomi."

Realizing the conversation was moving in a bad direction, Rentaro broke out in cold sweat. Why was I deliberately called to the Sacred Residence today? Once again, he found this quite unbelievable.

"Today, there is sad news that I must tell you no matter what."

Seitenshi paused and looked up.

"Mr. Satomi, your civil security company's Promoter License has been revoked."

"What!?"

My license has been revoked? Meaning that—

Ignoring the shock in Rentaro's heart, Seitenshi continued lightly:

"Do you still remember, Mr. Satomi? During the sniping incident when you protected me, I said 'I hope you will continue in your work. For my sake as well as for the state's.' I feel that it is most regrettable that I must take those words back so quickly."

"Hold on! If I lose my license now, Enju will be taken away by the IISO. Don't take Enju away from me!"

Seitenshi lowered her eyes in sorrow, turning her face away.

"It has already been decided."

Rentaro's clenched fists were shaking violently.

Taking out his license from the pass case, Rentaro handed it over to Seitenshi with shaking hands.

Holding back speech in hesitation, Seitenshi turned around, quickened her footsteps and left the throne room.

Whether the painting, valued at five million on the market, decorating the corridor or the bronze vase carved with Arabian patterns, neither could improve Seitenshi's mood.

Having left the great hall and walking on the corridor to return to her private chamber, Seitenshi found a man approaching from the opposite direction, dressed in a white traditional kimono. The white-haired and white-bearded man's physique was so strong and muscular that his body did not seem elderly at all.

This was the statesman who counseled Seitenshi, Kikunojyo Tendo.

"It must have been tough, Your Highness."

"The Honorable Kikujyo... Was this really for the best?"

"Of course. By having Rentaro Satomi quit his CivSec position and return the license just before the trial, the dignity of all civil security companies will not be compromised. This will also reduce to a minimum the harm to you, Your Highness Seitenshi, who appointed him to his position."

"However... This will also silence those who are petitioning his innocence!"

"No matter what happens, you must be protected before all else. This is my principle."

"That is not my choice."

"Your Highness Seitenshi... That is the path you must take. If the lifeboat cannot carry any more passengers, Your Highness must prepare yourself for the deaths of the remainder. It is the necessary course of action for saving the ecology of the lifeboat."

"If I alight the boat, one more person could be saved."

"Will you choose to carve out your own flesh to rescue the hungry? That would be the doing of a *saint* instead of a *politician*. Your Highness, you must grasp politics properly."

"The Honorable Kikunojyo, what is your view on Mr. Satomi as a person? He used to be your foster child and I have heard that when you were designated as a human national treasure and required to select an apprentice, instead of choosing a blood relative from the Tendo family, you chose Mr. Satomi. I believe that you probably don't go as far as hating Mr. Satomi, but why do you treat him so coldly?"

"...When that brat left to follow Kisara, I stopped regarding him as one of mine. If the brat loses his life in this incident, then it can only be attributed to his fate."

"That would be so..."

Feeling very sad, Seitenshi looked down and bit her lip.

Unable to endure any further, she threw herself against Kikunojyo's bosom. Leaning against his chest, she said quietly:

"I have noticed that my gaze always seems to follow Mr. Satomi. When talking to him, the beating in my chest always quickens involuntarily. I—admire Mr. Satomi very much."

Kikunojyo's chest shook violently.

"What...!?"

"I am suffering greatly. As part of my public duties, I must inflict sadness and torment upon him but privately, I would like to draw upon my full authority to rescue him instantly. My body and my heart are about to be torn apart. It feels like I am being drawn and quartered."

"..."

"I am suffering greatly. The Honorable Kikunojyo, what exactly should I do...? What should I do...?"

Kikunojyo silently placed his hand behind Seitenshi and gently stroked her back.

Part 10

Touji Watagasa kept his hand on the Elgrand's steering wheel and foot on the gas pedal while looking through the windshield. However, his mind was focused on the back seat that was too quiet for comfort.

It was already night. The headlights illuminated the uneven dirt road and driving along it felt absolutely terrible. Rolling over tree roots that were extending everywhere, the car kept shaking intensely. The tall trees extending from both sides felt stifling and he began to regret picking this shortcut for no reason.

Touji's job was transporting the offender Satomi Rentaro from the detention facility to the Sacred Residence, then driving him back to the detention facility.

Ever since he started his job as an escort officer, this was his first time entering the Sacred Residence as well as his first time transporting someone there.

As the driver, Touji was waiting outside and could not have known what occurred inside the Residence. But judging from the even somber mood in the car compared to the first trip, nothing good must have happened.

Touji examined the back seat through the mirror.

Sandwiched between two escort officers, Rentaro could be seen with his head bowed deeply, looking like a lifeless husk.

He had looked bad enough when he first got on the car, but now he was clearly even more pitiful compared to this morning. Simply observing him made one feel sorry inside.

As much as Touji felt an unerasable sense of resentment towards Cursed Children walking openly on the streets despite being carriers of the Gastrea virus, he fully understood that it was thanks to the valiant efforts of the CivSecs in the Third Kantō Battle that he was still alive. Hence, his feelings were very complicated.

During the Third Kantō Battle, Touji did not manage to draw the right to enter the evacuation shelters. Hence he could only lament the misfortune he and his family faced.

After hearing about Aldebaran's defeat, his joy could hardly be described with words. Hence, seeing the hero in such destitution, he wanted to do something for Rentaro, but as soon as he thought of anything specific, Touji's ideas were torpedoed.

If he helped Rentaro escape, the sense of satisfaction would totally fail to make up for the harsh consequences. After all, he still had a family to feed.

Touji could not help but mock himself—Just as I thought, I'm not cut out to be some sort of hero. In the end, all he could do was tend to his own very narrow surroundings. But that was fine too. It was okay for people to be more cowardly every now and then.

Even the hero who had mustered his courage to protect Tokyo Area had now fallen to become the abandoned one. This world's rules always changed according to the newest needs.

Thinking this and that randomly, Touji's concentration was scattered. By the time he noticed that something had rushed out from the forest and straight towards the car, it was already too late.

In the beginning, he was unclear what happened until the car's lights illuminated the darkness. Only then did he find a girl with short brown hair jump into the bright light.

Standing in the center of the road, the girl spread her arms. It was already too late by the time Touji understood that had happened and easily conceivable that the bumper was going to smash violently into the petite body in the next second.

A chill ran along his spine, causing Touji to stomp the brakes hard without thinking, spinning the steering wheel as hard as he could.

Turned to its limit, the steering wheel screeched as though screaming while the car careened towards the forest.

Although the car missed the girl by a hair's breadth, having left the road, the tires were sent into dramatically undulating terrain. The car's body's inertial force instantly increased as though getting swept away.

Realizing his error in judgment, Touji was overcome by a goosebump inducing sense of floating while his view was tilted to a great degree.

It was only seconds ago when Touji was convinced that he was going to return to the detention facility safely. Never could he have imagined that within the blink of an eye, he would be struck by intense pain.

The disaster also struck Rentaro in the back seat.

No sooner had he felt his bottom leave his seat when his view began to spin around, his body smashing randomly into various places inside the vehicle, causing great pain. Drowned in the sounds of screams and crashes, Rentaro's consciousness instantly faded away.

In this state of uncertainty, Rentaro woke up to find himself sprawled forward on the ground, his face buried in a soft object.

The continuously sounding horn was barely keeping Rentaro conscious.

After hearing a series of breaking sounds, he smelled a pungent odor. The back of his eyelids stung. It felt like he had bumped his throat earlier and it was painful to even groan. In any case, it was cramped and unpleasant.

In his hazy state of mind, Rentaro slightly opened his heavy eyelids and noticed an escort officer collapsed nearby with his head bleeding. It was the middle-aged escort officer with wrinkles on his face.

Rentaro discovered that the station wagon was upside down with the floor now acting as the roof. But why?

Inside the car's dim interior, it was difficult to get a grasp on the situation. Everyone else was silent apart from him.

Rentaro was a bit worried if they had died.

—Anyway, let me get away from here first.

Finding his hands still cuffed, Rentaro could not help but click his tongue. Having no choice, he kicked the car's side door.

After kicking three times with full strength, Rentaro managed to get the door open. Crawling out of the car, he saw the bright and pale summer moon hanging high in the night sky.

The station wagon really had overturned, leaving dramatic brake marks on the road. However, Rentaro still had no idea why the car overturned.

At this moment, he found a black liquid leaking out from the car. Only after smelling the pungent odor did he realize it was gasoline. If the engine's sparkplug were to emit sparks, it could be a fire hazard.

Using his cuffed hands that were difficult to move freely, Rentaro dragged out the two escort officers from the back seat to somewhere safe. As for the driver who was lying unconscious, collapsed on the steering wheel, Rentaro hauled him out.

As though with perfect timing, a slight spark from the sparkplug ignited the gasoline. As the flames of the explosion came rushing along with a heat wave, Rentaro could not help but shut his eyes. That was so close.

He swiftly examined his own condition. Luckily, there was nothing unusual apart from a few minor scratches and bruises.

Rentaro then turned to inspect the station wagon that was in a sea of flames.

How odd, why—

"Are you Rentaro Satomi?"

Jumping in fright, he looked at the voice's source and saw a girl's fluttering image across the flickering tongues of flame. She was petite in stature, as tall as a child. Her facial features could not be seen clearly, but judging from her slender legs that were dressed in a pair of hot pants, Rentaro could tell she was a young girl. Perhaps she had been silently watching his rescue activity since a while ago.

"Why save them?"

"Who are you?"

"None of your business."

"Did you make the car overturn?"

"You're the one who killed Mr. Kihachi, right?"

"Kihachi? You mean Suibara? No, I didn't kill him."

The instant Rentaro denied, the figure suddenly took a step towards him in a sudden burst of anger.

"Then why were you arrested?"

"That's because..."

The image of himself standing at the scene in shock, holding the XD handgun which was the murder weapon, suddenly flashed across Rentaro's mind.

Seeing him unable to reply immediately, the girl's figure extended her hand horizontally towards him. She was holding a small revolver.

"Don't blame me. Unless I do this, I cannot calm my rage."

The girl's index finger moved without hesitation, causing the trigger to pull the hammer back while the revolving chamber cycled slowly with a metallic sound. Bracing himself for the incoming impact, Rentaro tensed his entire body.

However, she did not fire immediately. She seemed troubled by the very contradictory fact that Suibara's murderer would rescue the three escort officers.

Just as the trigger was about to be pulled all the way, a loud siren intervened.

Undoubtedly, it came from a police car.

The girl clicked her tongue and swiftly turned to disappear in the forest. Rentaro originally thought she was just going to hide but the girl's figure leapt high above the canopy. That jumping ability was clearly beyond a normal human's.

Watching her back as she disappeared in the distance, Rentaro muttered to himself—An Initiator, I see.

He had no recollection of her voice. More importantly, he had never seen her face before, but judging from the fact that she was seeking revenge for Suibara and calling him "Mr. Kihachi," most likely...

Rentaro surveyed his surroundings. There was the overturned, severely damaged and burning station wagon as well as the three escort officers.

He knew it was going to be hard to explain but all he could do was relay the truth.

Just at this moment, a small key exposed slightly from an escort officer's chest pocket caught Rentaro's eye.

It was the key to the handcuffs.

Badump—His heart was beating intensely. Contrasting with this sound, the police car's siren was getting more and more quiet.

Right now, he could easily escape.

But in the worst case scenario, the car overturning accident would be blamed on Rentaro as well after he escaped.

He was just getting charged and the trial was going to take a long time, but if things did not end with acquittal, why should he endure for so long?

But was it really okay to do this? Rentaro asked himself. A so-called trial was an arena to determine whether the accused was innocent or guilty based on the gathered evidence. Up to this point, was there any evidence in Rentaro's favor?

So far, the detectives and inspector had pursued a mode of investigation almost akin to jumping to conclusions. It was almost certain that the principle of innocent until proven guilty was blatantly ignored.

Rentaro was going to be tied at the waist while transported back and forth between the court and the detention facility.

With that, Tina was going to be pronounced guilty first. Sentenced in conjunction with the Seitenshi Sniping Case, Tina would be executed immediately.

Even if sentenced to hanging, Initiators would suffer an unnecessarily prolonged death due their inborn gift of regeneration. But then in the case of using a cocktail of drugs such as barbiturates or muscle relaxants for a lethal injection, the Gastrea cells would likewise neutralize the injected poison, rendering it ineffective.

By process of elimination, Tina was probably going to be sentenced to death by firing squad. Taken to the execution grounds with trembling legs, a hemp bag over her head, tied to a pillar. A ten-year-old girl's fragile psyche probably could not endure the terror from an execution. It would only be natural for Tina to beg while crying, but ignored.

Furthermore, varanium bullets had to be used. Standing in a line, the execution squad would fire simultaneously at the captain's orders. As was customary, one of the firing squad's rifles would be loaded with a blank round. No one would know who received the blank. This was to allow the execution squad to console themselves after the fact, allowing them to justify mentally that "I didn't kill the target." On the other hand, Tina was going to die.

As for Kisara, having lost all employees, the Tendo Civil Security Company naturally had no choice but to shut down. She was going to get married while trying hard to have children in a struggle against the impediment of diabetes.

Her memory would gradually erode, forgetting all of them without looking back, be it Tina who was like a real younger sister, the energetic and difficult to handle Enju, or Rentaro.

Having lost her partner, Enju would be sent back to the IISO to be paired up with someone else. However, the next Promoter turned out to be utterly terrible.

The male Promoter would starve Enju and subject her to violent abuse. Enju's regenerative powers were granted by a metabolism several times quicker than a normal human's. Without proper meals, her ability regenerate wounds would slow down correspondingly.

If even the inhibition agent was withheld, allowing her corrosion rate to surpass 50%, Enju would be forced to transform into a Gastrea while suffering intense pain almost enough to cause her innards to burst out.

Whenever an outstanding Initiator like Enju transformed into Gastrea, the threat posed to mankind would probably be akin to a nightmare made real.

Furthermore, the people gathered to hunt down Enju would ironically be the CivSecs whom she used to feel the most solidarity with and prided herself as one of them—

Turning his awareness back to reality, Rentaro found his breathing had become short and quick.

Just now, his hallucinatory prediction of a dystopian future, was it really just a delusion?

Why was he unable to reject the possibility of that kind of future happening with great likelihood after he was pronounced guilty?

He spread his palms before his eyes. His wrists were marred by ugly bruises from the handcuffs and kept hurting.

He clenched his shaking fist.

—I didn't kill Suibara. Then why must I suffer this kind of unreasonable treatment? The people framing me don't need to atone at all and right now, they're probably laughing loudly, celebrating the success of their plan.

Suddenly, the corners of his eyes felt hot while his view turned blurry.

Rentaro was filled with regret that could not grow any stronger.

I want to take everything back. The daily life that was taken away from me. I will return the irreplaceable Tendo Civil Security to the way it was, together with Tina, Kisara and Enju.

After all, Rentaro was going to find the true murderer and incinerate him utterly by the flames of his blazing wrath. Not for others but for the honor and pride that had been tarnished and taken away from him.

The siren striking his ears was becoming stronger and stronger. Evidently, the police was going to arrive soon.

The remaining time was mercilessly urging Rentaro to make a decision.

After a while, Rentaro's body suddenly stopped shaking.

Looking up, he gazed coldly at the brightly lit commercial district on the other side of the forest.

Several minutes later, police officers rushed to the scene, only to find the overturned and burning Elgrand, three unconscious escort officers as well as a pair of opened and abandoned handcuffs.

Rentaro Satomi had gone missing from this point onwards.

Part 11

"What did you say...!?"

Seitenshi could not help but raise her voice.

"Mr. Satomi... escaped.....?"

"Yes, Your Highness. On the way back from the Sacred Residence, he successfully escaped, most likely due to a systematic attack on the escort vehicle. Currently, the three escort officers on the same car are still unconscious, so the details are unknown..."

The member of Sacred Residence staff saluted and reported, but Seitenshi hardly registered half of it.

She understood that her face must have gone completely pale.

How could this have happened? Her attempt at self-preservation by confiscating his license might have turned into the immediate cause precipitating him to take a reckless gamble.

Then what exactly should she do?

As the Tokyo Area's head of state, shouldering public responsibilities, Seitenshi must treat everyone impartially as a result of her obligation to love all citizens equally.

By the time she regained her senses, she discovered that someone was shaking her hard with his hand on her shoulder.

"Your Highness Seitenshi, please pull yourself together."

It was Kikunojyo.

"Pardon me for being forward, but that brat's escape simply implies that he is too weak. Your Highness only needs to do what you need to do."

Woken to a start, Seitenshi closed her eyes and tried to calm herself.

"Has the police been mobilized?"

Trying hard to feign composure, she barely managed to squeeze those words out. A member of staff answered with a well-projected voice while standing straight.

"Yes, they will probably be out in full force to arrest him."

"Then—"

"—Regarding the incident, may I be entrusted with full authority to deal with this matter?"

"Who is it?"

Hearing someone interrupt from the side, Seitenshi looked up in surprise and heard the sound of hard soles against the Sacred Residence's floor as a man emerged from the darkness on the far end of the corridor.

Approaching sixty in age. There was a diagonal scar on his head, resulting in a patch of baldness among his closely cropped hair. His eye bags were heavy and sagging. Those sharp eyes were giving off intimidating light.

"Superintendent-General Hitsuma."

Seitenshi's question was answered by Kikunojyo who was standing by her side.

The Superintendent-General of the MPD arrived before Seitenshi and bowed respectfully.

"My apologies for accidentally overhearing the conversation. It has been a long time since I paid my respects, Your Highness Seitenshi."

"Greetings, Superintendent-General Hitsuma. But why have you come?"

"I asked him to."

Answering thus, Kikunojyo gave Seitenshi a glance before continuing:

"Due to the security officers originally responsible for Your Highness' protection being dismissed for that incident of unseemly conduct, I am now the only one left to protect you. Such a situation is rather unsettling. Consequently, I seek your approval to borrow manpower from the police's security bureau to serve as security officers."

Hitsuma then added:

"Judging from what I heard just now, although it was not entirely due to our police organization's oversight, please rest assured, Your Highness Seitenshi, for I do have a suitable candidate who will swiftly apprehend the cowardly fugitive."

"And this suitable candidate is?"

"My son. Unworthy though he may be, my son does have some ability. A fugitive of that sort should not take long to capture."

Shutting the car door hard, Shigetoku Tadashima felt the stuffy night wind enter his nostrils, mixed with a faint scent of soil.

Surging out from somewhere, a large pack of reporters had gathered noisily around the scene of the overturned station wagon. The camera flashes, enough to illuminate the night sky, felt blindingly bright.

Nearby, the flashing of police and ambulance warning lights could be seen everywhere with a perimeter set up to seal off the area.

Tadashima pushed away reporters who were trying to crowd near, then bent down to pass under the barricade tape. At this moment, he heard a familiar voice shout: "Boss!"

Tadashima glared at the voice's source. The detective with the inexperienced face covered his mouth with both hands as though he had made a gaffe and muttered: "Oh right, you got promoted to section chief." This guy was Tadashima's subordinate, Yoshikawa.

"How's the scene?" asked Tadashima, ignoring Yoshikawa's comments.

"Check this out," said Yoshikawa as he led his superior next to the station wagon that had been burning until just now.

Glancing at the interior of the upside down station wagon whose roof was all smashed in, Tadashima stared at the brake marks on the muddy soil and asked:

"What was the situation like at the time?"

"While the defendant was being transported back, a girl suddenly rushed out in front of the station wagon. The driver had no choice but to swerve, causing the vehicle to overturn. The two other passengers were sent to the hospital for fractures. Having only suffered light injuries, the driver is now conscious and being questioned."

"A girl? Did the CivSec's Initiator come to rescue him?"

"No, that doesn't seem to be the case. The transported prisoner, Rentaro Satomi, went to the Sacred Residence today apparently to quit his civil security position voluntarily while handing back his license at the same time. Almost simultaneously, IISO staff arrived at Tendo Civil Security to take his partner, the Initiator girl... I believe she's called Aihara, uh—"

"—Enju."

"Yeah, that's the one. Aihara Enju was taken away in a partially coercive manner, hence she has an alibi."

"Then who the heck was that?"

Tadashima sighed. During the Seitenshi Sniping Incident, when Rentaro heard that Enju was captured by the enemy, he not only went pale but reacted quite strongly.

For this type of Promoter, who lavished great affection upon their Initiator, suddenly going berserk was very possible since losing their license would be equivalent to declaring them ineligible to see their Initiator again.

While fanning himself, Tadashima sat down on a fallen tree trunk nearby and looked up at the stars in the sky.

"Hmph, I never thought that kid would actually get prosecuted."

"Why do you say that, section chief? Do you actually think he's innocent?"

"No, I just thought that the higher-ups would do everything they could to cover up his crime seeing as he's the hero of the Third Kantō Battle, after all."

"Being extremely fastidious about moral uprightness, Her Highness Seitenshi hates these kinds of things. I'm guessing that Her Highness must have felt the same as Zhuge Liang when he tearfully ordered Ma Su's execution."

At this moment, the two of them suddenly went quiet. Tadashima took out a cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket then lit it. On the side, Yoshikawa muttered:

"Is that guy really a murderer?"

Inhaling the blue smoke forcefully into his lungs, Tadashima then looked up at the sky and exhaled.

"God knows."

Glancing at the police officers hurrying about at the scene, he stood up and took a breath, preparing to issue orders. But just at that moment, he heard someone's questioning voice say "Who is in charge here?"

On the other side of the flashing warning lights, barricade tape and where a large number of reporters' cameras were flashing, a tall and slender man was approaching in a straight line.

The man came before Tadashima and saluted.

"I am Hitsuma Atsurou, an inspector from the central office. Are you the officer in charge of the scene?"

Hearing that the man was higher in rank, Tadashima frantically threw his cigarette away and saluted back with legs together.

"I am Inspector Shigetoku Tadashima of the Magata police station. That's right, I am in charge of the scene here."

Due to neglecting to maintain a healthy lifestyle, Tadashima's physique had grown rather rotund. Saluting to the tall and slender man in front of him, the scene looked like a mocking illustration done as a sick joke, making Tadashima feel an extreme sense of inferiority.

"Another of those guys who passed the exam," muttered Yoshikawa slightly derisively to himself at the back. On the other hand, Tadashima elbowed him a few times to make him shut up.

"Excuse me, Inspector, but I shall be taking over this case's investigation with full authority."

"With all due respect, this case took place under my jurisdiction. Besides, why do you need to come here personally to a messy crime scene, Mr. Superintendent? Just leave the investigation to us."

Despite his reverent attitude, Tadashima was still questioning the man's intentions.

However, the pale man lifted his glasses with his middle finger and remarked indifferently.

"Inspector Tadashima, regrettably, I cannot do that. The situation is far more serious than you can imagine. A decision has already been made to set up a special investigation headquarters. And this headquarters will be located at the MPD itself rather than Magata Police Station, and personally directed by the Superintendent-General himself. Magata personnel will act under our orders."

Tadashima felt extremely surprised.

"Even the Superintendent-General rank is taking action?"

Hitsuma shrugged and answered.

"Yes, because it is an embarrassment for the entire police force. The higher-ups wish for this case to come under control as quickly as possible."

"Damn it!"

Something must have happened. Tadashima could not help but want to shout. The MPD only established special investigations when encountering major cases. Mobilizing the entire force for just a single fugitive was definitely not a good thing.

"Inspector, how long has the fugitive escaped?"

"Roughly an hour ago."

"So he shouldn't have gone far."

The rims of Hitsuma's glasses flashed.

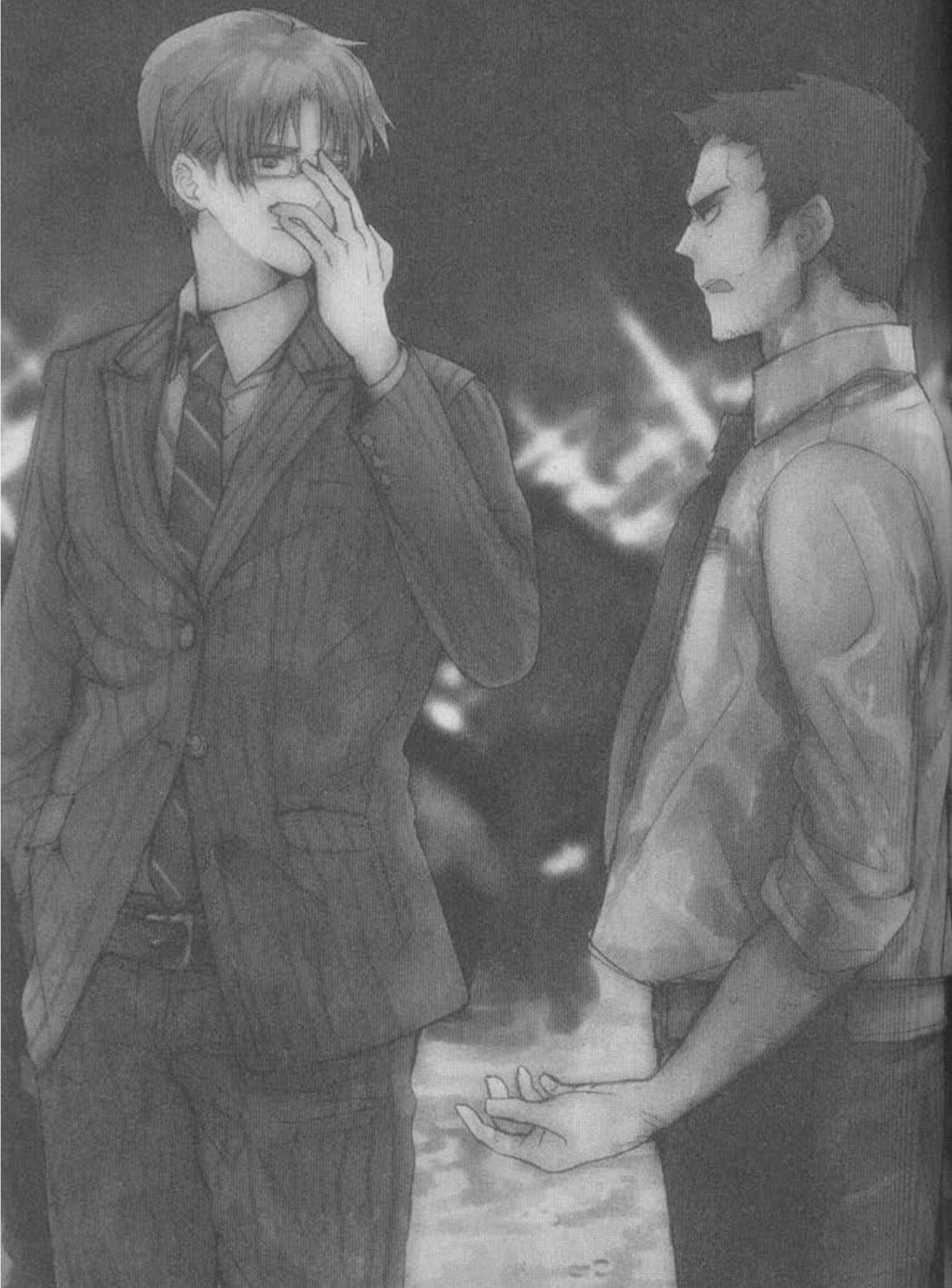
"Inspector, can you tell me about Rentaro Satomi? I read his basic profile on my way here. Height: 174cm. Weight: 62kg. Apparently entry level in Tendo-style unarmed martial arts. However, that's not what I'm interested in. You seem to be acquainted with the defendant, so from your perspective, what kind of person is Rentaro Satomi?"

"He looks sloppy but is extremely capable. Mr. Superintendent, no offense intended, but you absolutely won't be able to catch that guy."

Hitsuma grinned with a surprised look.

"Oh, so you do hold him in fairly high regard, Inspector."

Tadashima felt a chill along his spine for some reason.



Hitsuma clapped his hands to gather the attention of the investigators at the scene.

"So, everyone, to prevent the fugitive from getting far away, we will set up checkpoints within a twenty-five kilometer radius. The fugitive is named Rentaro Satomi, a male of average height, occupation being student as well as a Promoter at a civil security company. Photos will be distributed later. I repeat once again—The fugitive is Rentaro Satomi."

Hurry up and get to work—Hitsuma clapped his hands again as the investigators, who were supposed to be his subordinates, dispersed intelligently.

Behind Hitsuma, Tadashima carefully asked:

"So, Superintendent Hitsuma, what are you planning to do next?"

"Rentaro Satomi's circle isn't that broad, so it's easy to imagine who is the first person he will seek help from. After all, I know that person too. Let me take care of negotiations. Don't worry, Inspector, your prediction will ring false. This case will be closed tonight."

Part 12

The office of the third-floor tenant of the Happy Building—the Tendo Civil Security Company—was shrouded in heavy silence.

In front of the wide CEO desk of ebony, the girl in the black sailor-style uniform—Kisara Tendo—was sitting there without saying a word.

The sound of the clock's second hand's movement kept echoing emptily in Kisara's ear.

In her mind, a scene was expanding like a balloon while the ticking of the second hand rubbed against it. With the second hand poking at the balloon that was reaching critical size, it felt quite dangerous merely to behold. Everything would be over as soon as the balloon ruptured. Her instincts inexplicably told her so.

Just earlier, someone claiming to be IISO staff had come to the company, taking away the reluctant Enju.

Kisara never expected Rentaro to return his CivSec license to Seitenshi, turning Enju into the IISO's property to be reclaimed.

Something so ridiculous could not have happened.

Rentaro's obsession with Enju was obviously too severe even to an observer like Kisara. In light of that, Rentaro could not possibly have given up his CivSec license automatically, knowing that it would separate him from Enju.

Something must have happened at the Sacred Residence.

But was that really true? The sound of doubts surfaced in Kisara's mind.

'Please don't visit me again. I don't want to see your face and that's that.'

Why Rentaro suddenly put up such a cold attitude, Kisara still had no clue at all. But since Rentaro was suddenly acting like a different person, giving up Enju and obediently returning the license was not entirely unreasonable.

Kisara felt a depressed and painful feeling in her heart. Her mood was extremely bad.

Enju was gone, Tina was gone, even Rentaro was gone. In such circumstances, even running the company would be...

Just at that time, her cellphone rang. The ringtone was the third movement of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No.3.

Slightly hesitantly, Kisara operated her smartphone.

'Miss Kisara, it's me. I hope you'll help me out.'

"Satomi?"

She could not help but stand up from her chair. Checking the caller ID, "public telephone" was displayed.

"Hold on, what on earth happened to you?"

Through the smartphone's small loudspeaker, she could still hear the slight hesitation in his response.

'—I don't have time to explain right now. The situation has changed. I hope you can help me.'

"The situation has changed..."

'The first-floor cafe lounge at the "Magata Plaza Hotel." Let's meet there at 8:30pm, okay? I'll explain everything then.'

Kisara looked at the wall clock. There was only thirty minutes left.

A faint police siren was heard from the other end of the line. Rentaro clicked his tongue lightly.

'Miss Kisara, I will be waiting for you.'

"Oh, wait..."

Kisara wanted to continue but the sound of the line cutting off kept reverberating empty.

She was totally unable to understand what had happened.

To avoid destruction of evidence, it was ruled that Rentaro's detention period had to be extended. Bail was not possible.

But in spite of that, he was able to communicate with the outside world, which meant that he had run off on his own. Kisara did not know of any method to do that without breaking the law.

"No way..."

"Unfortunately, I can't let you go."

Suddenly hearing a voice, Kisara looked back in surprise. A glasses wearing handsome young man had started leaning against the wall at the office entrance at some unknown point in time.

"Mr. Hitsuma, why are you here?"

"That was Satomi calling just now, right?"

"No, it wasn't."

Seeing Kisara deny frantically, Hitsuma deliberately shook his head sadly.

"Perhaps you might have heard already. The escort vehicle carrying him had a rollover. Also, there was a girl accomplice who assisted his escape."

"A girl accomplice? ...Who?"

"Unclear. That is still under investigation."

Hitsuma spread his hands and walked to her. The smell of pomade came at the same time.

"I am sure you are able to understand how important the initial investigative work is, Miss Tendo, given your line of work in the extermination of Gastrea. Very regrettably, he has gone over the line. Can you tell me where he is? Currently, I can still exert some discretion within my authority."

"But then..."

Hitsuma's arm extended as though about to embrace Kisara's unease. Kisara took a step back, pushing Hitsuma's chest away.

Without feeling offended at all, Hitsuma simply said in puzzlement:

"You love him?"

"No way... Of course not. Satomi is stupid, has no perseverance, a total pauper, always makes lecherous looks whenever he sees Miori, keeps paying me no attention, it's always me who has to call him..."

Unable to continue, Kisara took her eyes off Hitsuma and looked down. Hitsuma gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

"If he wants to prove his innocence and uphold justice, he ought to do on in court. Perhaps he might be innocent, because the police definitely can make mistakes and arrest the wrong person.

"But even so, it is unacceptable for him to cause a rollover accident, resulting in injured personnel. Miss Tendo, if you are truly acting in Satomi's interests, you should know what the correct thing to do is, shouldn't you? It is impossible for a fugitive to stay on the run indefinitely in the cramped Tokyo Area. He will be caught eventually. You are the only one who can help prevent him from adding to his crimes."

'Please don't visit me again. I don't want to see your face and that's that.'

Kisara shook her head hard.

"I don't know. I used to understand him very well, what Satomi is actually thinking, but now, I'm not so sure anymore."

By the time she realized, Hitsuma was already lifting her chin, pulling her face towards his gentle smile.

"Then leave everything in my hands. I won't subject Satomi to poor treatment. Where exactly is he?"

Faced with the hesitating Kisara, Hitsuma approached even closer.

"Do you not care even if he dies under police gunfire?"

"No, don't."

Kisara came to her senses and looked down again.

"You should understand what needs to be done, right? Please consider carefully, Miss Tendo, what course of action would be in Satomi's best interests."

Quickening his pace, Hitsuma left Tendo Civil Security, going down the stairs and exiting the front of the building.

He could no longer maintain a calm expression. He really wanted to kick the first object to enter his view, be it an empty can or a small animal, anything—That was how agitated he was feeling.

Taking out his cellphone, Hitsuma picked a number from his recent calls and redialed it directly. The other side soon picked up.

"How is the reception on the eavesdropping device installed in Kisara Tendo's cellphone?"

'Excellent. But Rentaro Satomi immediately changed location after making the call. They agreed to meet at the first-floor cafe lounge of the Magata Plaza Hotel. Let's go there directly to catch him.'

"Hoo."

'Is something not to your liking?'

"Kisara Tendo... In the end, she still refused to tell me."

The voice on the other end spoke in a tone of total puzzlement:

'You don't trust our skills? Even without asking her, we can obtain information easily—'

"—That's not what I mean. I was only testing her. Whether Kisara Tendo was willing to sell out Rentaro Satomi... In the end, she refused to divulge the information the whole time."

'The plan is still proceeding within expected tolerance.'

"Yes..."

Hitsuma shook his head and switched his thoughts.

"Have you found the location of the *memory card*? Any news on Hotaru Kouro?"

'None at the moment.'

"Things have become very tricky."

Despite the whole pile of issues accumulating, they must be handled one at a time. First was Rentaro Satomi.

"Delay releasing the information to the police. Thirty minutes will be enough."

'Has the higher-ups said anything?'

"Hmph, my father passed on Her Highness Seitenshi's orders not to kill him. Looks like rumors are true that Her Highness harbors special feelings towards Rentaro Satomi."

'How enviable. So what are your plans? I don't suppose you'll ask us to spare him?'

Hitsuma's shoulders shook as he laughed:

"Don't be stupid, Nest. It's unclear exactly how much Suibara told Rentaro Satomi, but I don't care. After all, he must be eliminated. Send out Darkstalker."

Part 13

The Magata Plaza Hotel was a more resplendent building than imagined.

The cafe lounge's very tall ceiling had chosen a raised structure assembled with reinforced glass tracing out geometric patterns, delineating the cafe lounge's boundary with the outside world.

The downlights and the chandeliers produced orange light, casting a warm colors in the interiors while a classic melody flowed.

Waiters walked back and forth between the tables laid with exquisite snow-white table cloths. From time to time, there were even men dressed in expensive suits as well as gentlemen who appeared to be Oxford-style businessmen, passionately discussing the future decade of varanium-related industries with ladies.

Although the place was open to ordinary people, Rentaro could not see any customers who did not look like they were guests at the hotel. Perhaps he had picked a wrong time.

In the middle of all this, dressed in a dirty school uniform, sitting alone nervously at his own table, didn't he look especially conspicuous—Rentaro began to regret choosing this Plaza Hotel as a meeting place where he was clearly out of place.

His nerves were exceptionally on edge, not only because he had no money on him, but also because he had ordered quite a few cups of coffee.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw that there were ten minutes before the appointed time.

The police aren't gonna find this hotel tonight, right? Rentaro thought. He had picked this place instantly without thinking.

Trying to think from his perspective, alone and helpless, the police would try to predict where he was going to spend the night. One could sleep out in the open a day or two, but people tend to want to sleep under shelter with a bed and a roof. By that time, the first to receive the wanted notice would be hotels like these.

Rentaro made his decision. Once five minutes had gone past the rendezvous time, he would immediately leave and assume that something had happened on Kisara's side.

"Alone, are you?"

Suddenly spoken to, Rentaro looked up in surprise.

A smiling youth had appeared without him noticing, staring at him. The other guy was roughly the same height and probably of similar age.

Rentaro had some recollection of the youth's navy-blue gakuran-style school uniform with the standing collar. This was the uniform belonging to Nukagari High in the ninth ward where he lived. The youth showed a friendly smile. Being in constant melancholy with a face unsuited to lighthearted mirth, Rentaro felt quite jealous of the guy's strong aura of cheerfulness.

The mysterious youth smiled while toying with playing cards in front of him.

"How about a game of blackjack?"

"No thanks..."

Although Rentaro refused, the youth still sat down opposite Rentaro and dealt out two cards, ignoring his response.

The first open card was the King of Clubs. All cards Jack or above were considered ten in value.

Rentaro concluded that he had lost the chance to give a harsh refusal. Thinking he would drive the guy away after one game, Rentaro reluctantly flipped his other card to see the Ace of Diamonds. So long as the total did not exceed twenty-one, aces could be counted as eleven. In this game where getting a total of twenty-one was the object, Rentaro had effortlessly acquired the strongest hand, a natural blackjack.

When both sides opened their hole card, the other guy had sixteen so it was Rentaro's win.

The youth smiled and spread his hands.

"Congrats. As expected of the renowned Rentaro Satomi. Even the heavens have granted luck to you."

Rentaro's shoulder shook.

"Why do you know my name?"

The youth pushed the pile cards to the side while dealing more cards and saying nonchalantly:

"Kisara Tendo ain't coming, you know?"

Rentaro could not help but get up from his chair.

"You are...?"

The youth deliberately shifted his gaze from the cards in his hands to the table, presumably wanting to compete another round.

Despite feeling impatient, Rentaro knew that suddenly punching the other guy was not going to help. Helplessly, he could only sit down. After slightly lifting the card on the table that was face down to take a swift look, he calculated a sum of eighteen. Given this hand, there was no need to risk hitting up another card.

Both sides revealed their hole cards. The guy had eighteen too. A draw known as a "push."

The youth placed his elbows on the table and clasped his hands together, narrowing his eyes as he looked over.

"It took a lot of work to eliminate Suibara and Public Security then framing you guys with the crimes, but you ended up running away so uncooperatively, causing flaws in our blueprints. Now things have gone awry. Suibara had dirt on you and blackmailed you, unable to bear it, you killed him— This was the prewritten script. Rewriting it all over again now would be such a hassle."

"No way, was it you who—"

"—New World Creation Plan. Nice to meet you, my predecessor. I was created to surpass you."

Rentaro felt as though a massive impact had struck him on the side of his head.

"Impossible..."

In order to investigate the assassination incident of Suibara and Public Security, Rentaro had resolved himself to oppose another organization apart from the police. Although the enemy's true form could not be seen and was quite vague in appearance, Rentaro believed that the threat this organization posed greatly surpassed that of the police.

Before the whole incident happened, if someone said that this assassination organization was able to discover Rentaro's whereabouts in less than two hours after he escaped, Rentaro would have dismissed it with a laugh.

Were it not for this unbelievable truth standing right before his eyes...

Confronted with the youth's laid back attitude, Rentaro was stunned for a moment while the other guy took the opportunity to spread his hands and continue:

"My codename is Darkstalker while my original name was Yuuga Mitsugi. I don't mind what you call me. My mission is to execute you. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"What kind of joke is this!? The New World Creation Plan was cancelled a long time ago!"

"Then having been cancelled, I must be a ghost?"

Yuuga replied with hidden malice.

"Satomi, we want you as a live sacrifice. Tina Sprout will be executed. Kisara Tendo will be appeased and enticed to our side whereupon she will be used to take care of the Tendo clan. Enju Aihara's next Promoter partner is actually decided already. The Buddy Killer. A Promoter even worse than you can imagine. So long as your guilty verdict is pronounced, everything would be very perfect."

In other words, from the very start...

Ignoring Rentaro gnashing his teeth in anger, Yuuga continued with composure:

"I'm asking you because someone told me to. Where is the memory card Suibara gave you?"

Rentaro almost blurted out "what is that?" but luckily held his tongue in time.

He did not remember Suibara giving him something like that. But based on intuition, going along with the enemy's misunderstanding was the wise choice.

"What's in it for me if I give it to you?"

"Then this scene can end in the most peaceful manner. I will grant you the right to return obediently to prison. At least, you won't be losing your miserable little life."

"Screw you, fucking bastard."

A mocking expression of derision surfaced on Yuuga's face.

"Do you mean to say that negotiations have broken down?"

"There's nothing for us to talk about in the first place."

"Then I have no choice but to kill you and take that thing back. Seriously, what a fool. I clearly gave you the chance to live."

Invisible sparks were erupting between the two of them. The tense atmosphere was about to explode any moment.

Rentaro suppressed his emotions and calmly assessed the enemy's combat potential.

Sitting on the opposite side of the table, Yuuga was similar in build.

Capabilities unknown. If he really was a product of the mechanized soldier project, naturally, parts of his body had been replaced with machinery.

If Sumire was correct, Kenji Houbara and Saya Takamura, both of whom could be considered Rentaro's seniors as products of the New Human Creation Plan, were both killed by this guy. Those two had participated in the Gastrea War.

If he were to be defeated here, it would imply total defeat of the New Human Creation Plan by the New World Creation Plan. For the sake of those who had died, he absolutely must not lose.

Rentaro clenched his fist under the table.

"Then let's start. Find a place to—"

Rentaro decided to seize the initiative of the first strike. In sitting posture, he kicked the table hard.

The surrounding customers screamed one after another. Despite showing surprise on his face, Yuuga immediately leapt from his seat, hiding behind the overturned round table. Standing up, Rentaro stepped with his left foot to lower his center of gravity, delivering his right leg to the center of the dining table with a powerful kick.

From Yuuga's perspective, the overturned table just happened to block his view. With the table flying straight at him, in theory, it should be impossible to dodge.

—Precisely because Rentaro was thinking that, he was momentarily unable to react when Yuuga effortlessly jumped over the table to close in.

Seeing Yuuga aim a flying kick at him, Rentaro frantically picked up the table cloth using the tip of his foot, lifting his leg directly to bring the table cloth into the air.

Spread out in the air, the exquisite snow-white table cloth wrapped around Yuuga. Rentaro ducked forcefully using every joint in his body, causing Yuuga's flying kick to just brush past his ear.

Rentaro broke out in cold sweat, adjusted his pace and aimed at Yuuga who was wrapped up like a mummy by the table cloth.

Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 2, Number 16—

"Try this—Eat that!"

—Hidden Zen: Black Tempest.

A spinning kick, performed with the entire body's power, accurately struck the struggling Yuuga on the side of his head with a crisp "smack!" Sent flying by the kick, the opponent smashed into a neighboring table violently. The food on the table was spilt all over the floor while the porcelain broke with sharp noises. The screams of hotel guests were quickly turning into panicking.

That was the feeling.

But in the next instant, the one who exclaimed in surprise was Rentaro.

Yuuga did not collapse. Rentaro's kick had clearly left an intense mark of friction on the carpet but his opponent was not defeated.

He had blocked Rentaro's spinning kick, even under conditions of zero visibility.

Yuuga pulled away the table cloth that was wrapped around him.

The instant his enemy's face appeared from beneath the table cloth, Rentaro stared with his eyes widened, almost until his eyelids burst.

Both of Yuuga's eyes were showing geometric patterns while the internals of his black eyeballs were spinning at high speed.

"No way, how..."

Both eyes were artificial? That would almost be like—

"Hmph, you realized? Didn't I say so? I was created to surpass you."

Yuuga calmly pointed at his right eye and continued:

"This is the Modified Model 21, an improved version of the Model 21 Varanium Eye. Compared to yours, it's a model with vastly improved basic specs."

"Modified Model 21..."

Who could have made it?

Touted as one of the Four Sages, Sumire had developed the Model 21 Varanium Eye whose basic theory was said to be impossible for ordinary researchers to even understand.

Just as Rentaro was plunged into despair and stunned, a voice saying "excuse me, dear customer" came from behind Yuuga's back. The speaker was a muscular man in a black suit, apparently part of the hotel staff specializing in dealing with rowdy customers. Arriving a little late, he placed his hand on Yuuga's shoulder.

"Strife in the hotel will hinder other custo—"

"Smack!" With a crisp sound, the man spat blood and flipped over, collapsing unconscious on the floor. Without looking at him, Yuuga had delivered a backhanded punch straight to his chin.

"Kyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A piercing scream. By this point, the hotel guests frozen by the unusual situation finally came to their senses and rushed towards the hotel's revolving door entrance like an avalanche.

Amidst the earthquake of screams and roars, only Rentaro and Yuuga glared at each other silently, keeping their distance.

Yuuga reached to his waist and took out a weapon. Coincidentally, it was quite close to where Rentaro usually kept his own handgun.

What Yuuga pulled out was a Browning semi-automatic handgun—The Hi-Power.

Yuuga cocked the hammer and aimed the muzzle at Rentaro.

The opponent's narrowed gaze was enough to pierce him, giving off intense killing intent. The alarm ringing like mad also seemed to grow distant as a result of Rentaro focusing his concentration.

Gulping, Rentaro felt his heart pound like a beating drum.

Putting aside why his enemy had artificial eyes, he began to think.

Rentaro's artificial eye was originally meant to be a trump card for predicting a gunman's bullet trajectories.

But when the enemy possessed the same ability, to what extent could this theory be applied?

With less than ten meters between the two of them, it felt infinitely distant.

Rentaro silently closed his eyes.

—I mustn't feel afraid.

While opening his eyes, he simultaneously accelerated his artificial eye's super calculations to the limit. As a result, the artificial eye heated up, causing a scorching sensation of sharp pain coming from beneath his eyelid.

Overclocking his thinking capacity produced a view of exceptionally slow motion. Yuuga's index finger was on the trigger, exerting pressure slowly. For a single-action handgun, the Hi-Power's unique stroke could be said to be extremely long. Inside Rentaro's ears amidst his extreme concentration, he could even hear the friction from the trigger spring compressing.

Finally, starting from the trigger bar connected to the trigger, the hammer catch caused the hammer to swing like a pendulum, making the breech-lock's firing pin to strike the bottom of the cartridge.

Next—the lethal bullet carrying 339 foot-pounds of kinetic energy was expelled in a spiraling trajectory while accompanied by a muzzle flash, hurtling towards Rentaro in a fierce attack.

At the same time, Rentaro calculated the evasive position and charged.

Having surrounded the hotel securely, Tadashima and the other police officers could hear the hotel guests screaming while they fled in every direction.

"Superintendent Hitsuma!"

Inside the command vehicle, talking over a direct line, Hitsuma replied "I got it" and nodded before turning his face over.

"Inspector Tadashima, the Superintendent-General has issued orders for the Special Assault Team (SAT) to storm the place."

"The SAT? Is it necessary to mobilize them?"

Hitsuma summoned a SAT captain dressed in blue riot gear and the two saluted each other.

"Captain, begin the assault. Swiftly take care of the current situation, regardless of the fugitive's survival."

"B-But Superintendent Hitsuma, Her Highness Seitenshi issued orders to safeguard the fugitive's life as much as possible, so..."

"Captain, the situation is always changing. I hope you will definitely shoot the fugitive. I shall take responsibility."

Just at this moment, a shot rang out from inside the hotel. Tadashima and Hitsuma exchanged a glance.

"Section Chief!"

Tadashima's subordinate, Yoshikawa, frantically handed a pair of binoculars over.

Through the optical amplification device, Tadashima peered into the hotel's interior to see Rentaro Satomi in the center of the cafe lounge, fighting an unknown youth.

"What is... that?"

Tadashima could not help but groan. The fight was progressing more and more abnormally.

The mysterious youth fired repeatedly while Rentaro dodged every attack by the slimmest of margins by backstepping or sidestepping. Not only that, the latter was even making attempts at close quarter combat using openings faster than the naked eye could follow.

By the fifth shot, Rentaro finally rushed in at point-blank range, a domain close enough to decide the fight using fists.

Rentaro's fists swung thrice, each capable of deciding the battle so long as they struck a vital spot. As though in retaliation, the youth kept performing upper kicks. Rentaro leaned back to dodge while performing karate chops in attempts to crush the enemy's throat.

Both sides kept cycling between dodging and attacking with astounding speed, putting on a show that almost seemed like a sparring battle. In every second, the number of moves they performed in opposition was at an insane level.

Staring intently at each other, what they actually saw was beyond the present. As soon as he realized that the two of them were dodging attacks while calculating the tactical progression of the battle ten moves later, Tadashima felt terrified from the bottom of his heart.

This was not a battle that ordinary humans could compare to.

—What the heck were those two people doing?

Preparing for the assault, Tadashima reached into his suit and tightly gripped the revolver in his holster.

Of course, Tadashima could not have known this, but observing while calculating with thoughts at the astounding rate of close to hundredths of a second, maintaining a grasp on the situation while taking action even surpassing the human muscle reaction limit of 0.2 seconds, driving their bodies to fight persistently under such harsh conditions, naturally, such a battle could not possibly be limited by common sense.



Installed in the artificial eyes, nanocore processors were calculating near their limit in order to capture the opponent's openings.

However, the battle was slowly swaying in one side's favor.

"Gah!"

Suffering a blow that almost made the contents of his stomach flow in reverse, Rentaro fell on the floor violently, flipping nearby tables over. Ice water from a glass splashed over his head.

"Specs. The difference in specs is too great."

In front of Rentaro's blurry vision, Yuuga leisurely spread his hands.

Observing Rentaro closely, Yuuga snorted and said:

"Satomi, I know that your right knee's flexor and biceps femoris muscles as well as your left arm's extensor carpi ulnaris and flexor carpi ulnaris muscles are tensing. So your next attack is an attempt to feint with a left punch while using your right leg for a mid-level kick for the real attack. But this is no good. After the thirty-seventh exchange, my kick will smash your skull. Checkmate."

Rentaro was so intimidated that he threw away his earlier tactical analysis and tried to come up with a new plan.

"Oh my, you're changing tactics again. But this move is even worse. If you try to pin me down with a sacrificial charge, after less than ten exchanges, your lower jaw will be broken then it's checkmate."

"What..."

His internal brain connections short-circuiting and unable to decide on how to proceed, Rentaro kept faltering due to fear.

Smiling with assured victory, Yuuga lowered his center of gravity just as a group of men in blue riot gear rushed in all at once from the window at the front of the hotel.

—The SAT? Why?

Too quick. The alarm had sounded not too long ago.

The situation was developing beyond Rentaro's comprehension, but these guys definitely were not here to save him.

Fleeing was the best choice.

Instantly, a move flashed across his mind to revive the hopeless situation.

—In that case, how about I try this!

The artificial skin of his right leg ruptured, exposing the prosthetic limb glinting with black chrome beneath. The striker inside his right leg impacted the cartridge, ejecting spent shell.

"Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Rentaro kicked with his right leg using the inertia. His target was the floor under the carpet. The tip of his foot, made of supervaranium, tore through the carpet, crushing the marble beneath and the infrastructure below, causing the fragments to fly up.

The damage caused by these fragments was no less than that of a directional anti-personnel landmine.

Turned into hundreds and thousands of fragments, the floor flew accurately at the SAT team and Yuuga. Simply getting struck by a fragment in the head would definitely cause a concussion. Even a blow on somewhere else in the body, such as on Yuuga who was not wearing any protective gear, bone fractures all over the body would not be unexpected.

However, Yuuga simply protected his face while charging at the fragments. Then the great amount of fragments struck him all over, causing blood to spurt and clothing to be ripped, but he still broke through the storm of fragments.

By the time Rentaro realized his enemy had crashed into his bosom, delivering a palm strike to his chest, it was already too late.

Seeing Yuuga's vicious and gleeful look, Rentaro went pale in fright.

"I'm impressed with how hard you fought, Satomi. Farewell."

The palm strike twisted directly on his chest as intense pain assaulted Rentaro as though his innards were turning.

The grim reaper was clutching his heart with ice-cold hands— This scene flashed across Rentaro's mind. Hastily, he turned around and kicked the ground to jump away, avoiding a critical injury. A hard object struck his back hard, squeezing out all the air in his lungs.

By the time he regained his senses, panting heavily, Rentaro realized he had jumped into an empty elevator.

Yuuga chose to pursue. Rentaro reflexively smashed the buttons to the top floor and for closing the elevator doors.

Yuuga approached swiftly. The door's sluggish movement was making Rentaro want to scream.

The elevator's heavy doors closed at the last second. In the instant just as his enemy's figure vanished from Rentaro's sight, Yuuga kicked, trying to prevent Rentaro's escape. With the weird noise of metal getting crushed, the elevator doors bulged inwards a great deal.

The entire elevator shook as a result while dust fell from building materials that had been shaved off. It took Rentaro a bit of time before he realized this was a disaster caused by the enemy's kick.

Even so, the cable gears at the top of the elevator shaft finally decided to pull the steel cables up after what seemed to be a moment's consideration. Although the elevator was moving slowly, Rentaro still felt a lethargic sense of ascent beginning.

Gritting his teeth hard to endure the pain, Rentaro carefully lifted his uniform's shirt. Yuuga's attack had left a pathologically dark bruise on his chest.

What kind of technique could cause such damage to the human body?

There was only one thing Rentaro could be certain. That last attack was undoubtedly a finishing move. A direct hit would have sealed a fate of death.

This was the New World Creation Plan.

"Damn it...!"

Exhaling deeply with his abdominal muscles, Rentaro stared up at the ceiling light stupidly.

Yuuga watched the floor indicator light intently for the elevator Rentaro was taking. Despite his prey escaping, Yuuga's heart was still completely serene.

He grinned.

"Great, time for the game to start, Satomi. Let's see if you'll be able to escape the hotel in one piece."

"Freeze! Drop the gun and put your hands on your head!"

A gruff roar suddenly came flying from behind.

His carefully maintained mood destroyed, Yuuga narrowed his eyes with displeasure and turned around. As expected, a great number of men had their eyes and guns pointed at him.

Black bulletproof vests on top of blue riot gear. Helmets with visors. The first row of men were carrying handguns with one-handed bulletproof shields while the guys in the back were wielding submachine guns. The SAT.

Yuuga impatiently placed his left hand on his head while pointing at his shirt pocket with his right finger. Having obtained permission through eye contact, he slowly reached for and took out a pass case then tossed it at the police.

Picking it up gingerly, the SAT member carefully examined it. The pass case turned out to be holding a CivSec license.

Yuuga was neither Promoter nor did he have an Initiator existing as his partner. This license was purely to allow him to carry a handgun openly on the streets, a counterfeit provided by the Organization but these people were probably never going to figure that out.

"What? So you're a CivSec. What brought you here?"

"I saw the news and knew he was on the run. Then I ended up running into him here. I originally wanted to take care of him so as to redeem my profession's honor, but didn't expect him to escape."

The SAT member threw the pass case back and waved.

"Anyway, we will take care of this. You should back off."

Yuuga shrugged and was about to leave when two detectives happened to enter through the revolving doors of the front entrance. One of them was the tall and handsome Hitsuma which anyone could tell from afar, but who was the fat and middle-age detective beside him?

Hitsuma clapped his hands to gather the SAT's attention.

"Immediately cut off the elevator's main and auxiliary power to isolate Rentaro. The rest of you, climb up the stairs. Another team has already landed on the roof for a pincer attack. The fugitive must not escape."

At Hitsuma's orders, the SAT divided into two. One group rushed up the emergency escape staircase with noisy footsteps.

Just as Yuuga passed Hitsuma shoulder to shoulder, he murmured in a barely audible voice:

"I'm going somewhere else to ambush Rentaro Satomi."

"Don't do anything stupid, Darkstalker. I can't cover you all the time."

"Got it, Mr. Hitsuma."

The conversation finished with any eye contact. Yuuga passed through the revolving doors to get outside where a large number of police cars with warning lights had surrounded the hotel.

Hot and humid wind blew against his cheeks. For some reason, it felt quite refreshing while he looked up at the Magata Plaza Hotel towering under the night sky.

Having allowed the prisoner to escape once, if Rentaro still managed to flee successfully from the hotel, the police's dignity would be at stake. It looked like the police was going to put everything on the line to take care of him.

His next opponent was the SAT.

Rentaro patted his cheeks hard to pull himself together.

He could not stay caged and waiting for his death.

The elevator was going to be unusable soon. All that was required was someone from the hotel side operating the main switch and this elevator would stop precisely at the desired location.

With that, the elevator would turn into an iron coffin and getting caught would become a mere matter of time.

But how exactly could he escape the hotel...

Looking at the panel displaying the floors, Rentaro saw that this hotel was apparently thirty-two stories. He pressed the nearest twentieth floor and the elevator doors opened soon with a quick sound.

In the next instant, the lighting inside the elevator suddenly switched off, plunging his vision in total darkness. About to close, the elevator doors were halted indefinitely in their unfinished action.

Rentaro was instantly surprised then realized the police had operated the main switch after he had taken action. Cold sweat slid down his back.

The corridor he was on still had power. The beige wallpaper was combined with soothing gentle lighting. However, towels, bathrobes and other articles were scattered on the floor.

Probably scared by the alarm, almost every door on this floor of guest rooms were open, giving an impression like the guests had all fled desperately. There were no signs of anyone with almost all guests having escaped swiftly.

Carefully, Rentaro approached a window on the twentieth floor and looked down in trepidation. The police cars were silently flashing spinning warning lights while erecting a secure encirclement with barricade tape on the outer circle. Reporters from the media and crowds looking for excitement were forced even farther out. There was no gap for even an ant to escape.

The sound of spinning rotors was suddenly heard from a distance. Rentaro rubbed his eyes to see a helicopter flying in approach with swaying searchlights.

The light was getting close, Rentaro swiftly left the window side.

He could not keep staying here. The police must know by now that the elevator had stopped at the twentieth floor.

Going downstairs was ruled out as well. His only choice was to go up, but that was going to corner himself gradually as well. Rentaro understood from the bottom of his heart.

Following the green light shaped as a person to indicate the emergency escape, Rentaro pushed the metal door open. Cold air caressed his skin. The hotel's luxurious atmosphere instantly changed. This was a plain emergency escape where ducts and other structures were exposed bare, spiraling upwards and downwards in both directions.

Footsteps could be heard faintly from downstairs. Rentaro leaned at the railing and peered down to see SAT members with visored helmets and dressed in riot gear, roughly seven floors down.

One of them happened to make eye contact with Rentaro. Rentaro hastily pulled his head back from the railing just as the SAT member pointed his gun at him and pulled the trigger.

As gunshots rang out, the noise reduced by a suppressor, the railing's frame was repeatedly struck by bullets. Rentaro could not help but shrug his neck.

While breaking out in cold sweat, he lowered his stance and ran as fast as he could. In any case, there was no choice now but to flee upwards.

Unfortunately, a short while later, he also heard the clattering of footsteps faintly from above. Rentaro was so frightened that his back froze.

That was most likely the team that landed via helicopter.

Realizing he was getting hit with a pincer attack, Rentaro fell into despair while looking at the door plate behind him. It read twenty-fifth floor.

Opening the metal door, he rolled on the twenty-fifth floor's ground.

This relatively wide corridor still had beige wallpaper and wall lamps. Within his view, similar looking doors stretched throughout the corridor.

The appearance was the same as the twentieth floor's. Many rooms were unlocked because their occupants ran in terror at the alarm. What was strange was that the situation was similar to the twentieth floor in that even valuables were scattered all over the floor.

He had no choice but to engage his opponents here.

Rentaro frantically rushed into an empty room as his reason told him to wait.

The enemies were experts in assault and counter-terrorism. Was it really good to hide in a room.

Rushing into a nearby room, Rentaro struck a dressing table mirror with his elbow, producing a shattering sound akin to the smashing of crockery. In the mirror's fragments, he found a suitably sized piece and took it away. Then he left the room, arriving at the T-shaped corridor and rushed to the leftmost side, pressing his back against the wall, extending the mirror fragment towards to corridor where he had passed through, turning his wrist to adjust the angle to conduct surveillance.

Soon after, a barely audible sound of the metal door turning could be heard faintly. The atmosphere in the deserted hotel changed as a result.

They're coming.

Through the reversed world in the mirror, he saw a total of six men, including the shield carrying vanguard.

What was astonishing was how they could still move so noiselessly while wearing helmets, bulletproof vests, combat boots and other heavy equipment.

Judging from their footsteps, they were probably certain that Rentaro was on this floor.

Rentaro lightly wiped his palm's sweat on his pants.

The visors on the helmets could guard against flashes. The submachine guns were split evenly between the highly accurate models of Heckler & Koch and Shiba Heavy Industries.

Fortunately, they still had not realized Rentaro's location.

Coming here as soon as he started his life as a fugitive, all Rentaro had on him was his clothing. Let alone a wallet, he did not even have a gun. Nevertheless, he still had to take care of these people barehanded.

Even if he charged at them in a sudden attack of reckless abandon, he would disable one or two people at most before getting shot to death. But staying in the same spot would mean getting discovered sooner or later. They were going to throw special flashbang grenades, the type producing all three effects of explosive noise, bright light and a pressure shockwave was extremely terrifying, showing its true worth in the context of indoor battles.

Especially the pressure shockwave which could cause precision instruments such as cellphone or watches to malfunction. Detonating at close range, it could even fracture bones or rupture eardrums. This was the not the type of grenade that could be resisted by covering one's eyes and ears.

His pulse quickened and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

What to do? What to do?

While Rentaro was hesitating, the SAT stormed the suspected room with textbook perfect procedure in pairs to eliminate visual blind spots, breaking through the door to clear the room. The surprising thing was how they were still not making any noise.

Moving slightly, he felt the tip of his foot seem to kick something. Rentaro looked at the floor to see a matchbox with the Magata Plaza Hotel logo printed on it.

Probably a guest had dropped it in their haste to escape.

Rentaro suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

Looking straight up at the ceiling, Rentaro found the object he wanted.

Just as he concluded it would work and nodded, something unexpected happened.

A room door suddenly opened on the corridor and a woman walked out unsteadily.

Rentaro originally thought she had failed to escape in time but he soon realized his was mistaken. Judging from her glazed eyes, she must be suffering from some kind of malady.

A SAT member pointed his gun at her in surprise.

"Hey, stop it—"

Rentaro's attempt to stop him failed and gunfire erupted. The woman was unfortunately shot. Her knees collapsing, her entire body sprawled on the floor.

Rentaro's first thought was to rush over to the woman but was forced back by fierce cover fire. Accompanied by rumbling and crumbling, the wall's construction materials were broken into powder, obstructing his view.

His position was exposed. There was no time to think.

Rentaro immediately rushed into the nearest room and moved a chair. Stepping on the chair, he struck a match. The hot flame was lit in his hand. Raising his hand, he directed the fire towards a corner of the ceiling.

Rentaro brought the match close to the target—a fire detector on the ceiling.

The heat sensor misinterpreted the match's small flame as a full-blown fire, hence issuing orders to activate the sprinkler installed on the side in order to extinguish the fire.

Thus, heavy rain fell upon the entire floor.

Hearing the SAT's yelling and peeking out in the corridor to see if the gunshots had stopped, Rentaro found things going just as planned.

With the heavy downpour robbing them of their sight, the SAT detachment was in a state of panic, frantically trying to take off their helmets.

The chance for victory.

Rentaro jumped out from behind a wall and activated his artificial leg's gunpowder detonated propulsion. The thruster ejected gas from the sole of his foot.

"Hahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Using super acceleration that seem to almost break his body apart, Rentaro charged across the corridor, jumping straight into the center of the approaching SAT detachment.

Finding someone suddenly intruding on the center of the team, SAT members showed clear surprise even from behind their visors.

Using the thruster's remaining acceleration, Rentaro converted it into rotational energy by turning his pivot foot to unleash a spinning kick, smashing the polycarbonate shield in the shieldbearer's hands together with his protective visor. The SAT member's body fly high up in the air and bounced away.

Fearful of friendly fire, the vanguard took action a step too late, and together with another team member who was struggling to remove his helmet, both men were violently struck in the face by Rentaro's backhanded punches executed simultaneously with both hands. Without waiting for them to react, Rentaro looked for his next target. One SAT member suffered an upwards palm strike to the chin, causing his head to shake violently together with the visor, while Rentaro delivered a spear-handed strike to another's throat without even looking.

Rentaro could not imagine what went through the last man's mind as he saw his teammates taken out in a fraction of a second.

That guy instantly abandoned his submachine gun and tried to pull out his backup handgun from his waist. However, this decision could only be described as too naive.

In extremely close quarter combat within punching range, there was no room for a handgun to debut at all. All Rentaro had to do next to decide the battle was rely on the unarmed martial arts he practiced every day.

Charging into the guy's chest, Rentaro ended the battle. He first used one hand to put pressure on the opponent's holster, preventing him from swiftly drawing the gun while preparing his other hand for a palm strike, positioned on the vest's bulletproof plate.

"Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 12—"

A pitiful look of fear flashed across the SAT man's eyes, but it was too late now.

"—Flash Aerial Ripple."

The entire air on the floor shook. Bouncing away, the SAT member had his eyes rolled over. Momentum was transferred without reservation with the force applied to the body in a state of close contact. No matter how thick the bulletproof plating, it was meaningless against this type of move.

Absolute supremacy in close quarter combat. This was the unchanging principle of Tendo Style Martial Arts' success over its long history.

Under the sprinkler's abundant rain, Rentaro silently entered the "Infinite Longevity" stance. Only then did five SAT members collapse after a moment's delay as the man who was first kicked flying by the spinning kick struck the floor violently.

The battle was decided. Falling on him, the raindrops were wet and sticky, making his uniform wet and heavy.

While feeling water dripping from his hair, chin and tip of the nose, Rentaro maintained his stance for now and adjusted his breathing.

After regaining his senses, he ran over to the woman who was shot by accident and knelt down beside her.

"Hey, hang in there."

Examining the wound, he found that her abdomen had been shot by a 9mm round. Instead of penetrating all the way through, the bullet had lodged in her body.

The woman gazed at Rentaro with hollow eyes.

"...I, have insomnia... I took... sleeping pills."

It was said that the body would suffer serious discomfort and compromised balance if forced to wake up while under the effects of sleep medication. Using powerful sleeping pills to overcome some type of sleep disorder, the woman ended up unable to escape in time in response to the hotel alarm, thus arriving at this outcome.

Rentaro took a towel from a nearby room to tie around the wound to stop the bleeding but the towel was quickly dyed red. At the same time, the injured woman's body was becoming cold from loss of fluids. This type of first aid treatment was unable to save her, but Rentaro did not want to admit defeat just like that.

Nodding, he went over to a collapsed SAT member. He was the culprit who had shot the woman by accident.

Kicking the submachine gun away, Rentaro took off the man's combat knife and gun holster together.

Confirming he was completely disarmed, Rentaro knelt down and slapped the man's face.

He woke with groan, his confused gaze gradually focusing on Rentaro. Rentaro wondered if he should praise the guy for being a professional special assault team member? The man immediately figured out the situation and simply stared at him in resignation and said to Rentaro without shouting:

"You have no escape. Further resistance will only add more to your crimes."

Rentaro raised the stolen gun and aimed it at him, threatening with an even colder voice:

"Shut up. You just shot an innocent person. She needs surgery immediately to extract the bullet. Are you willing to carry her downstairs? Nod silently if you're willing."

The man instantly made a frightened look but quickly nodded solemnly.

Cautiously, Rentaro continued to aim the gun at him while having the man load the woman on his back and watched as they made their way down the stairs. Holding the woman's hand, Rentaro said:

"Hey, you're gonna be saved. Don't worry."

The woman looked at him with glazed eyes, speaking in broken sentences:

"You are... fleeing... murderer... why, save me...?"

"..."

The woman reached for his face.

"Thank... you... Thank—"

"Don't speak. Just focus on the fact that you're going to be saved."

Rentaro prodded lightly with the gun. Hesitating many times but failing to speak, the man looked back at Rentaro but still went down the stairs in the end. Carrying someone down twenty-five floors required a lot of stamina but a SAT member probably should not have a problem.

Watching them disappear from view, Rentaro pondered at the same time.

Having lost contact with the main party, this SAT detachment was only going to cause the police temporary panic. Once they realized it had little effect on the overall situation, the remaining personnel was going to storm the place. Rentaro could not be so sure that he would win if that happened.

It was possible that there were other guests apart from that woman who had not yet escaped. I might as well break into the nearest room and take the guest as a hostage. With that, I can prevent the police from striking preemptively.

"Totally absurd."

Rentaro immediately shook his head.

The reason why he escaped was to clear his name and find the real murderer. If he engaged in any behavior beyond self-defense during the process, it would be putting the cart before the horse and equivalent to adding new crimes.

Looking up the staircase, Rentaro instinctively knew this short escape drama had to end, so he had better fight to the bitter end.

Reaching the hotel's top floor, he continued to ascend without giving a second look. Ignoring the "No Unauthorized Entry" sign, Rentaro arrived at the door leading to the roof.

The door handle creaked as he turned it forcefully but the door did not budge. It looked like it was locked.

Rentaro swung a punch with his artificial arm, striking the target squarely with the sound of rupturing. The door hinges fell off and the door flew outside with a refreshing sound.

Arriving at the roof, Rentaro could see the swiftly flowing clouds even under the night sky. The sky seemed so near to him.

Totally drenched, Rentaro felt cold as the high-rise winds lowered his body temperature.

Coming to the edge of the building, he looked down to see police lights flashing below. Luckily, the rotor sounds of helicopter somewhere were still quite distant.

In front, he could see a building taller than the Magata Plaza Hotel. Rentaro found himself coming up with an unbelievable sense of déjà vu.

That was the Seitenshi Sniping Incident. Back then, he was fighting the assassin Tina Sprout at an abandoned urban district in the outskirt areas. In order to approach her sniping location, Rentaro had fired his artificial leg's thruster in rapid succession in reckless display, allowing him to jump from one building to another.

Could he repeat the same feat now?

Rentaro looked at his feet. Naturally, the only surrounded building was this hotel. The opposite building was not barricaded at all. Judging by eye, the distance from the hotel to the other building was roughly 10m. There was a river separating the two buildings.

During the battle with Tina, he had overcome an even longer distance, hence using the same technique, it should be even easier.

—Can I really do it?

Rentaro lifted his hand to his face. His palm was shaking slightly.

It would be lying if he said he was not scared but confidence in his past success in escaping hopeless situations finally pushed Rentaro.

Backing from the railing to the opposite railing, he created distance for a running start.

Rentaro rehearsed in his mind. If he timed the jump wrong, he would undoubtedly fall to his death. He recalled this hotel as being a 147m tall building. If he messed up, he would have quite a long duration for regrets before hitting the ground.

Making then releasing a fist, he tried to soothe his nervousness but his palm was immediately moistened by cold sweat.

Inhale, exhale.

Staring ahead, he started to run. In the beginning, it was almost like walking speed, then slowly, he accelerated then dashed as fast as he could without getting his legs tangled together.

The railing was approaching before him. Following his momentum, Rentaro stepped on the railing and leapt hard. After a brief period of gliding, the wind lifted his body, producing a strange sense of floating.

At the same time, he ignited the cartridge inside his artificial leg. With the sound of an explosion, he felt astounding acceleration with his entire body.

Widening his eyes slightly with some difficulty, he watched as he flew straight forward across the sky.

Angle and timing of the thruster were both perfect. Then next was igniting another cartridge to prevent loss of speed—

However, he suddenly felt his flank suddenly penetrated by a destructive impact, causing his view to shake violently.

"—Huh?"

Success—Just a few seconds earlier, he had been thinking that. So for a moment, he was unable to comprehend the implications of the blood spurting from his abdomen and scattering in the air.

Then the world flowed in a strange slow motion.

Rentaro easily lost balance, plunging head first. At this time, he saw it.

A gunshot wound on his abdomen. It was the result of a sniper's attack. The shot had occurred while he was flying across the sky at high speed.

Almost reflexively, Rentaro used his artificial eye's distance gauge to capture a building's roof at a hundred meters away. A figure was next to a massive illuminated advertisement board.

"No... way—"

While feeling his body dragged down by gravity, Rentaro was sucked into endless darkness.

The smell of gunpowder scorched the nostrils. White smoke rose up from the muzzle.

"Checkmate."

Firing from a kneeling stance on a rooftop, Yuuga looked up from the night vision scope affixed on top of the DSR sniper rifle.

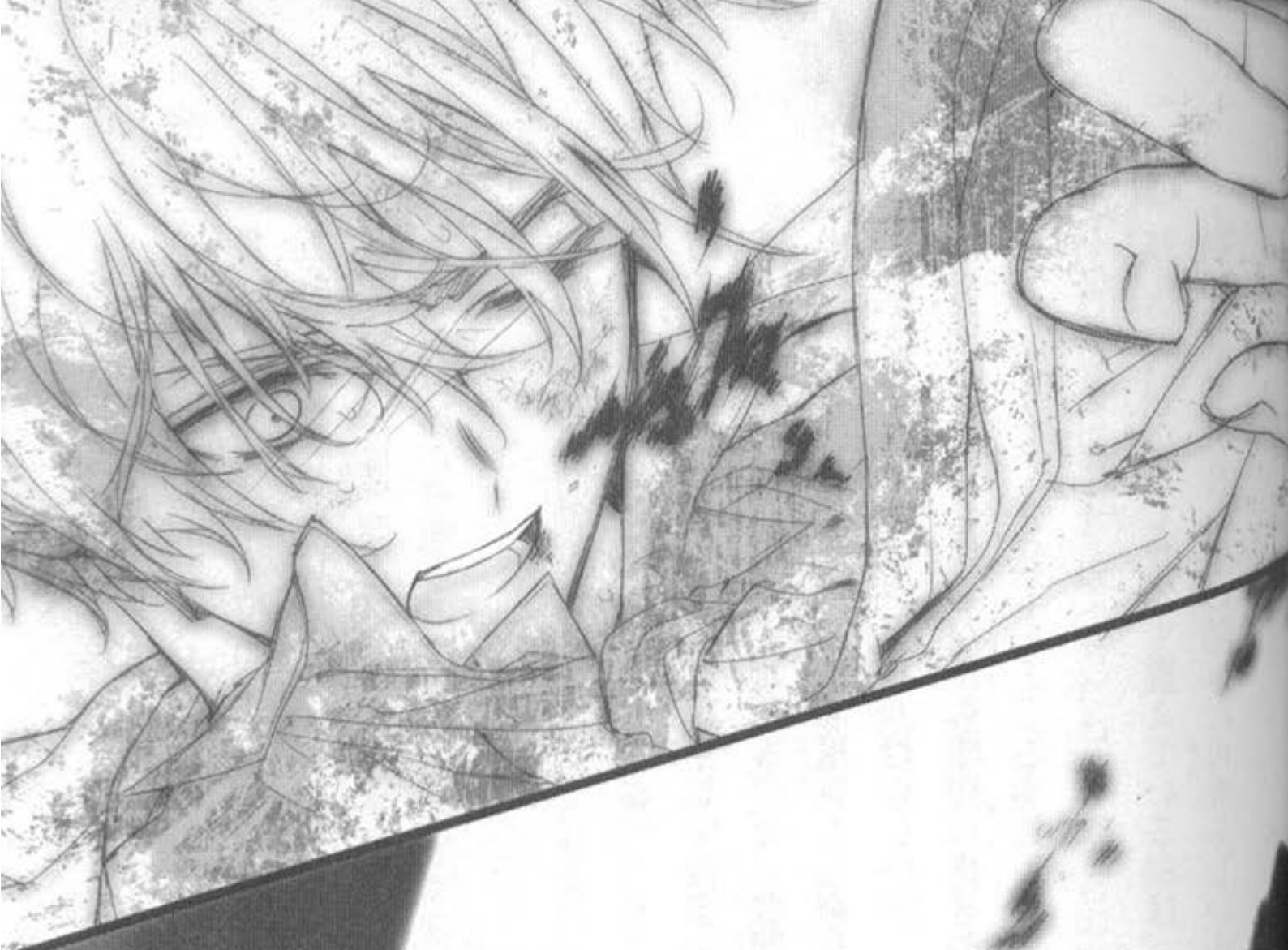
He operated the bolt-action lever and the ejected shell bounced on the floor.

Standing up, Yuuga stared for a while at the spot where Rentaro had crashed down. Then he took out his cellphone to make a call.

"Darkstalker reporting to Nest. Mission accomplished. Target silent. Awaiting further instructions."

'Eliminated for certain?'

"Impossible to confirm due to target falling into river, but plunging into water at this height would be no different from striking asphalt. All bones in the target should have shattered. My condolences to his friends and family."



Part 14

"Impossible...!"

Excessively surprised, Seitenshi stood up from her throne and covered her mouth with both hands.

The short-haired MPD Superintendent-General stood with his hands crossed behind his back, shaking his head sadly:

"It seems like there was no choice but to shoot the fugitive due to violent resistance. But that cannot be helped."

Simultaneously, at the Tendo Civil Security Company...

"No way, impossible..."

Retreating a number of steps backwards, Kisara immediately bumped in the desk behind her.

Her legs went limp and lost strength. Hitsuma caught her.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Tendo. I have emphasized repeatedly to avoid harming Mr. Satomi but it looks like my orders were not followed to the letter."

Held in Hitsuma's arms, Kisara kept shaking.

"What to do... What... shall I do? Whether Enju, Tina or Satomi, none of them are here anymore."

The usually strong girl was shaking timidly, a most alluring sight.

Hitsuma blew at the adorable ear hidden under her long sleek black hair, making Kisara's body shudder once.

Hitsuma offered sweet words to her:

"Now that you are all alone, allow me to fill the void of your solitude—Let's get married, Kisara."

With their chins resting on each other's shoulder, Hitsuma could not see her face, but soon after, he could feel a nodding motion amidst her trembling.

—Now, this woman is mine.

Suppressing the urge to exclaim triumphantly, Hitsuma allowed his gaze to wander.

Beautiful hair akin to moist feathers of a raven's. Pallid skin and a slender neck. Due to emotional turmoil, her collarbones were showing a faint pink color while under the fabric of her sailor-style uniform, two bountiful fruits were definitely occupying substantial volume, giving off a fresh and tender taste. This body was a work of art.

How would it feel to the touch—Attempting to savor the goods, Hitsuma was just about to reach for Kisara's chest when his cellphone rang in his chest pocket.

He almost clicked his tongue in annoyance but in the end, he had no choice but to abandon Kisara and take the call outside the office.

'This is Nest. Regarding Rentaro Satomi, Darkstalker wishes to speak to you immediately.'

The time was 1am.

Gathered on the riverside where Rentaro fell was a large group of police officers. Mitsugi Yuuga was also among them.

Hands stuffed into his pockets, Yuuga stared intently at the pitch-black water surface.

They were asking themselves: "That was it?"

Rentaro Satomi. They recalled his past experiences. Savior of the Tokyo Area. Currently the CivSec pair receiving the most world attention. Defeated the Kagetane Hiruko pair of IP Rank 134. Defeated the Zodiac Scorpion. Defeated Tina Sprout of IP Rank 98. Defeated Aldebaran the immortal Gastrea.

If it was an ordinary CivSec encountering such a situation, death could be concluded with 100% certainty. However...

At this moment, a bespectacled handsome young man stood next to Yuuga.

"What's the matter?"

"Mr. Hitsuma, can you send out divers now?"

Yuuga spoke while staring at the pitch-black water surface. Hitsuma showed doubt on his face as though failing to comprehend the meaning of his question.

"It is still dark outside. It's useless even if divers were dispatched."

"At least for ease of mind. It'll be too late if we wait until sunrise."

Hitsuma frowned.

"Could it be that you believe Rentaro Satomi survived? You're the one who claimed to have shot him down."

"Because he is an opponent who cannot be judged with common sense. I am suggesting this just to be safe."

"You seem to rate him highly."

"You may not understand because you haven't fought him directly. Back when I was created, the required specs was 'enough to defeat Rentaro Satomi instantaneously.' According to prior calculations, the chances of Satomi landing a hit on me is only 0.01% but even though I blocked it, his preemptive kick did strike me for sure. Furthermore, during the battle when both of us were using artificial eyes, he had three punches that exceeded my calculations, brushing past me dangerously. At the very end, I was even unable to dodge those fragments. Satomi is clearly capable of acclimatizing to my attack movements."

"..."

"Mr. Hitsuma, you won't be able to sleep peacefully until you personally witness him dismembered or decapitated, right?"

"You brat, are you threatening me?"

Yuuga shrugged and raised both arms to show that he was backing down.

"Nothing like that. I'm just offering advice. Anyway, could you please arrange for divers. I believe that it would be wise to assume his survival until we actually see his corpse."

Chapter 2 - New World Creation Plan

Part 1

The rhythmic sound of water dripping into a puddle was heard nearby. In the distance, cicadas were chirping.

The stench of rust. The air in skin contact was humid, sticky and stuffy. Where on earth was he sitting? Rentaro Satomi felt hard surfaces against his back and bottom.

He had slept for who knows how long. It was time to wake up. He still had many things to take care of. Something very important...

He tried to twist his body, only to discover that his hands were almost impossible to command freely. As soon as he tried to move his arm, he heard metallic clanging. Both hands hurt.

Where was he being imprisoned?

—What is this place?

The most basic question rose up in his mind.

His eyelids felt as heavy as iron. But no matter how difficult, he still tried to blink. Amidst the darkness, the surrounding scene slowly began to become clear at last.

First he saw the blue tiles of the floor. He was apparently sitting on tiles.

His hands were restricted in movement, suspended in the air.

He turned his neck slightly to look at his arms. Both wrists were confined by handcuffs, connected to a red-rusted pipe. Rentaro's back was leaning against something resembling a bathtub.

He was cuffed to a pipe next to a bathtub. This room was roughly three tatami mats in area, making it difficult even if he simply wanted to stretch his legs. Was this a bathroom in someone's house?

Rentaro finally figured his current situation but still could not understand what was going to happen next.

Who had imprisoned him here and for what purpose?

His mind was still hazy. But there were two things he could understand.

First of all, he was still live. Secondly, it was probably not the police that captured him. If the police had arrested him, he ought to be waking up in a hospital bed or something like that.

Looking at his abdomen, he saw several layers of bandages wrapped beneath his uniform shirt. Simple as it was, he had received treatment.

The bathroom was very dark and isolated by a sliding door. There seemed to be a light outside the frosted glass but it was blurry and unclear.

Forcing his body to twist, he felt a sharp pain from his flank which spread throughout his entire body.

"Anyone, there...?"

He called out in broken sentences a number of times. The ground shook with thudding. A silhouette appeared on the bathroom's frosted glass ahead then the sliding door was opened.

"You woke up."

First to enter his view was a pair of slender legs, or rather, they should be called too skinny.

Looking up, Rentaro found her four limbs so slender that they looked they could easily snap. Denim shorts paired with a pink tank top with an American Apparel jacket on top. Strict looking eyes under a bob cut. In the depths of those narrowed eyes, anger was burning quietly. A girl akin to a glacier.

"Do you know who I am?"

Rentaro nodded slowly. He desperately searched the memories in his tense mind. He remembered she was called—

"You must be... Hotaru Kouro, right? Suibara's Initiator."

Hotaru nodded quietly.

"Do you understand why you are imprisoned here?"

Rentaro looked around the cramped bathroom again.

"Sort of."

His memories only extended as far as when he was sniped and fell into the water.

Since he had not drowned, it meant that someone had fished him out from the river at some point.

Apart from that, having saved him, she...

A muzzle, darker than death, suddenly blocked his view. A pistol was raised before Rentaro's eyes.

"Anything you wish to say?"

"You're the one who caused the station wagon rollover, right?"

"Indeed."

The girl answered with cold and fearless eyes.

"Why did you do that?"

"To avenge Mr. Kihachi, what else?"

"You look very calm right now."

"Do you know how long you've been unconscious? Three days. It's already been three days, of course I'm calm."

"Why didn't you kill me immediately?"

"I want to hear you repent your sins."

Without moving even an eyebrow, Hotaru kept glaring at Rentaro.

"I didn't kill Suibara."

"Quit joking."

The answer itself was very calm but bright red color appeared in Hotaru's black pupils. The gun's hammer was already cocked and the grip was creaking from excessive force.

Quiet hatred shrouded the petite body.

"Are you that afraid of dying?"

"I'm speaking the truth. I really didn't kill Suibara—"

Rentaro felt an impact that almost smashed his jaw. By the time he realized, he was already looking up at the ceiling tiles. Forced to bite down, he felt his molars shattering. A rusty smell of blood was spreading in his mouth. After a while, he realized Hotaru had kicked him in the chin with the tip of her foot.

"G-Gah."

Glaring at Hotaru, he spat out his shattered molar, mixed with saliva, a thread of blood dripped down like a spindle.

Hotaru was staring down at Rentaro with eyes like an executioner's.

"I didn't hear clearly."

"Like I said, I didn't kill him—"

This time, he was kicked in the wound on his flank.

"Gah... Guh."

Stepped on by her sole, his wound was producing intense pain that almost felt like it would melt his brain.

Hotaru's handgun was pointed at Rentaro's head again.

"Enough. I have no interest in sadism, so this is the last time I'm asking you. If you confess honestly and repent, I'll hand you over to the police without killing you. But if you lie, you'll fall over with an extra hole between your eyebrows. Think carefully before you answer—Do you wanna live? Or do you wanna die?"

Rentaro continued to glare upwards at Hotaru while he nodded silently.

"Then let me ask you. Do you feel any remorse for killing Mr. Kihachi? Mr. Kihachi considered you his best friend, but you killed him using an underhanded trap. Do you feel the slightest guilt? Answer me."

How similar to a witch trial. In the end, she only wanted him to say the confession she hoped for, without considering at all the possibility of Rentaro being innocent.

Even so, there was no pretense in her words at all. If Rentaro insisted on crying innocent, she was probably going to pull the trigger for real.

Let's confess just to save my life for now—Rentaro's rational voice sounded in his mind. This girl was like the police. Relying on them was totally useless.

After some hesitation, Rentaro made his decision and looked into Hotaru's eyes. Word by word, he spoke clearly:

"Believe me. I didn't do it. Honest."

A shot rang out in the bathroom. Rentaro lifted his leg. Ping! The shell fell on the floor and bounced a few times. Finally, silence returned.

White smoke escaped from the burning muzzle.

Slowly turning his head to the side, Rentaro saw the bullet embedded in the bathtub very close to him.

With her back towards him, Hotaru took out a cellphone from her pocket and dialed a number.

After a while, she went "Oh, is this the police?" and threw Rentaro a glance, looking up at the ceiling as she continued:

"I happened to discover the wanted criminal Rentaro Satomi and captured him out of civic obligation... Yes, no, this isn't a prank. Honest."

She swiftly reported her address and name, ending the conversation before looking back at Rentaro.

"Although they are suspicious, the police will still come. This place is not far from the nearest police station, so it shouldn't even take five minutes."

Hotaru knelt down to accommodate Rentaro's eye level while he was cuffed.

"I will listen to your story. But only until the police arrive. When they come, I will hand you over."

"Why not kill me?"

"You are not worth killing. I will let you die after going through the humiliation of a trial."

"What did you hear from the police?"

"You called Mr. Kihachi out then killed him for financial gain."

Rentaro almost laughed out loud but could not because he was coughing intensely. After spitting out the bloody phlegm, he stared hard at Hotaru and said.

"The police said that I killed Suibara to silence him because he was blackmailing me."

"...Rubbish. Mr. Kihachi doesn't do anything like blackmail."

"Of course Suibara didn't threaten me. Neither did I threaten him. How's that? Just based on what you and I know, there is a huge discrepancy in the story. I know the police must have traitors within their midst. Don't you find it suspicious? Don't you feel that something isn't right?"

"...Four minutes left."

"I definitely need to apologize to you. But that's because I failed to protect Suibara. Back when he came to find me, he was already very nervous. If I had asked him to spill everything as soon as we met, I could have halved his burden by sharing the load. I am really sorry for the two of you for missing this chance in the beginning."

Hotaru closed her eyes and frowned painfully.

"Stop talking."

"Hey, even courts have to listen to testimony from both sides before letting the judge or the jury decide, right? You've already heard the police's version, so listen properly to my defense now. But it's just that I can't finish within five minutes. I hope you'll give me a chance."

"Chance?"

Hotaru could not help but lean forward. Rentaro cautiously continued:

"Someone framed me. Those guys not only want to push all the charges on me but even the Tendo Civil Security Company is also their target. I won't be manipulated. I must catch those who framed me. Will you help me?"

"You just want to escape."

"If that's what you think, just hand me over to the police straight away. But if you feel you should listen more to what I have to say, I hope you'll hand me over later. You want to know the truth, right? In the beginning, I accepted Suibara's request. He was holding some kind of secret and wanted to expose it directly to Her Highness Seitenshi through me, but was killed. There must be conspiracy here."

"...Two minutes left."

"Suppose there isn't a mastermind after all, I'm fine if you kill me. Even if you want me dismembered, roasted or dying out in the open, whatever you like."

"Are you... serious?"

Rentaro looked back into Hotaru's eyes and nodded hard.

"Please believe me, the one whom Suibara trusted. Please."

For quite a while, they gazed into each other's eyes without saying a word. The silence was almost suffocating. Every time water slid from the tap and fell on the tile beside Rentaro's feet, there was a dripping sound.

Just as Hotaru wanted to speak up, the doorbell rang mercilessly. The police had arrived.

Rentaro closed his eyes, desperately trying to suppress his body's shaking. Time's up?

With eyes showing frozen emotions, Hotaru got up and went out of the bathroom.

Because the frosted glass door was not shut tight, Rentaro could watch the whole development in detail from the bathroom.

The bathroom seemed to be quite near the main door. After exiting the bathroom, Hotaru immediately took down the chain lock to let in the people outside.

Rentaro could see Hotaru from his angle but not the police officers outside the entrance.

"Did you call the police?"

Hearing voices, Rentaro instantly felt an intense chill down his spine.

"Yes."

"Uh, well—Let me be direct. Did you really catch Rentaro Satomi?"

It was apparently the skeptical voice of another police officer's. Probably a pair of partners.

'Please come in. He is locked in the bathroom over there.'
Rentaro predicted Hotaru to say that next and felt compelled to close his eyes.

Everything was over.

"Sorry, but it was a prank call. I totally didn't expect the police to come here for real."

Seeing Hotaru bow her head deeply in an ashamed manner, Rentaro almost cried out "Eh?"

The police duo were not particularly angry and simply said in gentle voice:

"Okay, that's what I figured. News reports have indicated that Rentaro Satomi might not have died. But even if that's the case, kids should not play pranks on adults, okay?"

The police duo chose a lenient attitude towards a mischievous child in response to Hotaru's profuse apologies. After asking a few questions, they left

Putting away the ashamed look, Hotaru resumed her poker face and walked over to Rentaro. Kneeling down on one knee, she took out a key from her pocket, inserting it into the handcuffs restraining Rentaro and turning.

"Why...?"

With the sound of metallic friction from the handcuffs, Hotaru spoke without looking at the touched Rentaro:

"Because you're probably not the killer, right?"

Rentaro was speechless.

She was right, of course. But up till this point, no one was willing to listen no matter how much Rentaro screamed and yelled.

His eyes brimming with hot tears, Rentaro wiped the corners of his eyes with his now freed elbow.

Soon after, the handcuffs fell to the ground with a metallic clang.

Confirming there was nothing wrong with his arms, Rentaro tried to stand up. However, he could not stand straight due to the intense shaking in his knees.

Silently, Hotaru gestured to suggest supporting him with her shoulder. Rentaro did not put on a brave face and accepted her offer, wrapping his arm around the back of her neck.

As soon as he left the bathroom, the cicada noises striking his eardrums went up by one octave.

Outside the frosted glass of the bathroom was a one room one kitchen setup. Due to the apartment's small size, it seemed very messy.

Due to being locked in the bathroom, Rentaro was not sure, but it looked like it was daytime outside. The poor natural lighting in the interior showed great contrast with outdoor conditions. For some reason, Rentaro superimposed this scene with that of the Satomi home.

After scanning the mess of magazines and newspapers on the floor, Rentaro found that they were all related to the Rentaro murdering Suibara case.

Sensational headlines included "The Fallen Hero" or "Rentaro Satomi Arrested" etc as every media outlet went out in full force.

Back when the Third Kantō Battle ended, Rentaro had been extensively reported about. Never did he expect to become the center of attention again in less than a month, and in this manner.

Listening to the weird noises made by the air conditioner while it was operating, Rentaro was assigned a creaking metal bed to sleep on. The blanket used to cover his body felt very stiff.

Looking up at the ceiling, could see rain leak marks all over. The wallpaper was peeling off and faded.

He suddenly had a question. This was probably an old apartment building but no matter how he looked at it, this unit was designed for one person to live in with only a single bed. Wasn't Suibara living together with her?

Putting his doubts aside, Rentaro lay down on the bed, pulling up his shirt and bandages to examine the wound on his abdomen.

The tragic wound, enough to make one groan, entered his view. The blood had already stopped but the wound looked burnt.

"How did you stop the blood?"

"I applied pressure with a heated pan."

"No wonder there's a smell. So it was barbecued meat."

Hotaru widened her eyes slightly and sighed.

"Looks like you still have enough energy to make jokes. I don't know if it counts as lucky or not, but the bullet passed right through your body."

"Of course that's fortunate for me."

"Unfortunate for me."

Despite the anger that was making her lift her chin and respond coldly, Hotaru still narrowed her eyes and glanced at him from the side.

"Your body is quite interesting."

Following her gaze, Rentaro looked at his artificial right arm and right leg. After unleashing them during the siege at the hotel, the artificial skin had ruptured, exposing the black limbs underneath.

"What is that?"

"Didn't Suibara tell you? This is the personal armament from the New Human Creation Plan."

Hotaru's eyes widened even more.

"...I always thought it was just an urban legend."

Rentaro was unable to understand her reaction.

"Then I guess you know nothing about either the New World Creation Plan or the Black Swan Project, right?"

Hotaru made a puzzled look with her head tilted.

I see. Suibara had completely kept the dangerous knowledge away from her to prevent her from getting involved.

Wasn't the fact that she was not assassinated like Suibara the best evidence for that?

If she had the same knowledge as Suibara, she probably would have been listed among the assassination targets. Letting her survive alone would be illogical.

The people who assassinated Suibara must have concluded that leaving her alone would not pose a threat.

At this time, Hotaru tossed the first aid kit over. Inside was the metabolism boosting agent that had saved Rentaro many times, the biological adhesive called fibrin.

This was one of the CivSecs' favorites for improving the healing of wounds. Although it was not as miraculous as the magic and recovery items in Enju's favorite RPG videogames, the increase in wound regeneration still far surpassed the speed of natural healing. While enduring the sharp pain in his abdomen, Rentaro narrowed one eye as he applied the fibrin on his wound and wrapped it up with fresh bandages.

As soon as it occurred to him that he had finally escaped from the crisis of death, practical as ever, his stomach started protesting against hunger.

After shamelessly begging Hotaru, in order to minimize strain on his stomach, Rentaro first drank some dilute rice gruel before ravenously swallowing porridge.

Having starved for only three days, his digestive system was not too severely weakened. Even toast and thick soup were barely possible to swallow without vomiting. The toast was only toasted slightly on the surface and eaten directly without jam. But with every bite, the taste of wheat would spread out in his mouth. For some reason, Rentaro almost wanted to cry. By the time he realized, he had already eaten everything.

The food at the detention facility was not bad but Rentaro felt as though he had not eaten such meaningful food for so long.

Having filled his stomach, Rentaro lay down in bed with satisfaction.

The hard blanket with the creaking decrepit iron bed felt as comfortable as a bed in heaven. Rentaro almost plunged into the land of dreams but now was not the time to sleep yet.

Because the situation was not showing signs of turning around.

The chaotic battle at the Magata Plaza Hotel felt like it had taken place a long time ago. But as soon as he recalled how he was toyed with there as well as all of his bitter and suffering memories, Rentaro's anger rose.

Rentaro missed Enju, who was taken away by the IISO, and Tina, who had lost her freedom, most of all.

The youth at the hotel who had said his codename was Darkstalker—Mitsugi Yuuga—had clearly stated that Enju's new partner was going to be the "Buddy Killer" while Tina would be executed.

Rentaro was very concerned about developments in the past three days.

"I still can't trust you completely, but it's time for you to tell me everything you know."

Sitting on the bedside, glancing sideways at him, Hotaru spoke in a disinterested manner.

"Okay, but where should I start..."

Rentaro looked up at the ceiling and talked about Suibara's request that he had accepted, how he was arrested, and everything all the way up to his escape from the hotel. Once she finished hearing everything, Hotaru rested her chin on her hand and pondered with a solemn expression.

"In other words, Mr. Kihachi was eliminated by the secret organization because he came across details about the New World Creation Plan and the Black Swan Project, right?"

"You believe it?"

"It's far too complicated for a fabricated story. Besides, I did feel that Mr. Kihachi had been hiding things from me. It's just that never in my wildest dreams did I expect something so huge..."

The police had laughed at the idea for being ridiculous but now someone was willing to believe. Apart from joy, Rentaro also felt surprise but Hotaru did not lower her guard. With eyes filled with defiance, she stared at him and said:

"What are you planning to do next?"

"What do you think?"

"That person called Hitsuma is probably in league with the killer."

"Probably."

Yuuga had mentioned at the hotel.

'Satomi, we want you as a live sacrifice. Tina Sprout will be executed. Kisara Tendo will be appeased and enticed to our side whereupon she will be used to take care of the Tendo clan. Enju Aihara's next Promoter partner is actually decided already. The Buddy Killer. A Promoter even worse than you can imagine. So long as your guilty verdict is pronounced, everything would be very perfect.'

Kisara Tendo will be appeased and enticed to our side whereupon she will be used to take care of the Tendo clan— This was the issue. Kisara was not a fool who would be toyed with by the enemy, but as long as she trusted the other person to some extent or if the other side had mind control abilities, it would be a different matter. Considering the most likely suspect among the people in contact with Kisara recently, the range was naturally narrowed.

Supposing Hitsuma was a member of the enemy organization, he would have a chance to get information about Rentaro that only she knew, then setup an ambush.

Hitsuma had withheld orders from the police temporarily and dispatched Yuuga before setting up police around the hotel just in case. Then what happened that day could be explained logically.

Although Rentaro did not think Kisara would easily leak out his location, judging from this, it looked like Kisara had already fallen into Hitsuma's grasp...

Closing his eyes heard, Rentaro clenched his fist until it almost bled.

—I thought I could rest assured, handing Miss Kisara to you, Hitsuma. Miss Kisara also trusted you all along.

He gnashed his teeth until noises were made.

—But you exploited Miss Kisara. Unforgivable.

Originally in deep thought, Hotaru looked up and said:

"I will kill that guy named Hitsuma as well as Darkstalker who might have committed the actual crime."

"No good."

Hotaru seemed quite miffed.

"Can you tell me why?"

"It doesn't resolve the matter. If you're unlucky, you'll just end up with two more murder charges in addition to injuring three people with the rollover accident."

"The enemy used illicit methods first, so why do we have to hesitate before using illegal force?"

Rentaro had felt that Hotaru was very similar to someone and finally figured it out.

'Satomi, it is totally clear to me now. After the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, you were unable to punish the mastermind, Kikunojyo Tendo. After the Seitenshi Sniping Incident, you were unable to punish the mastermind, Sougen Saitake. But I was able to punish the culprit responsible for the Third Kantō Battle, Kazumitsu Tendo. Do you know where the difference lies?'

'Do you still not understand? Justice is no good. You cannot oppose evil by relying on justice alone. Instead, you must rely on "absolute evil" that is even more evil. That is the kind of power I possess.'

"Wrong, that mindset is wrong. Even when treated with illicit force, you must make them pay by using legitimate methods. Besides, I won't be able to face Suibara if you became a criminal."

"Let's cut the pretty words. Then what do you say we should do?"

"Get a hold of evidence about that whatever Black Swan Project and expose it, then capture those people. Then it's not just Hitsuma and the others but also the entire organization can be brought to justice in one go."

And as long as they were lucky, catching the true killer would prove Rentaro's innocence.

But naturally, this was no easy thing. Trying to report the Black Swan Project, Suibara was already assassinated. Let alone Rentaro, even Tina, Enju and Kisara, the entire Tendo Civil Security had been swept up into the affair.

It was unclear what the enemy side knew about them but as long as Rentaro's corpse was not recovered from the river, they were surely going to pursue eventually.

By that time, hunting down Rentaro would not be just the police controlled by Hitsuma but mechanized soldiers from the terrifying New World Creation Plan, the upgraded version of the New Human Creation Plan.

To be honest, no number of lives would be enough.

Danger all around. Isolated without help. The situation was approaching the worst possible.

If possible, Rentaro did not want to risk Hotaru who could be considered Suibara's orphan.

"I hope you don't get the wrong idea..."

Still expressionless, Hotaru's cold eyes blinked slightly a few times under her short brown hair.

"I must avenge Mr. Kihachi. You are simply bait."

"Bait?"

"That's right. Once they know you're still alive, the smell of your blood will draw a large number of enemies. Truly convenient. I just need to take care of the enemies who are trying to kill you."

She lifted the hem of her jacket. Rentaro expected her to simply put her hands behind her back but in the next instant, she pulled out two black guns.

"Now I can pay tribute to Mr. Kihachi through battle."

Rentaro could not help but exhale emotionally. Although her fingers were not on the triggers, a moment's carelessness would result in her shooting in a quick draw.

The first time he saw Hotaru, he already gathered a vague sense that she was very adept at using guns. Hence, this was how she fought.

Her handguns were the Gold Cup National Match edition M1911s, a derivative of the standard-issue sidearm manufactured by the Colt's Manufacturing Company. Although it was not a design suited for dual wielding, the gun was easily held in a girl's petite hands. Also due to the gun's elegant appearance, it was a well-known model highly rated among gun aficionados. Hanging on her lower back was a cross-shaped holster for two guns.

Keeping her guns raised, Hotaru stared at Rentaro's direction with icy eyes.

"Let's be more practical. I want to use you and you can also use me. No need for bullshit. I won't care about your survival during battle and in return, you can abandon me any time you want."

"How about mutual assistance?"

"Not needed."

Rentaro felt a bit angry. When she was bullshitting the police, for an instant, he had thought they had reached an understanding but that turned out to be nothing more than an illusion.

"...You are free to fight with whatever reasons you pick, but you have to leave that Darkstalker guy for me to handle. That's the poseur who was wearing a standup collar uniform."

"Is he strong?"

"Ridiculously strong. He's not someone you can handle."

"Don't underestimate me."

Hotaru suddenly threw a black object at Rentaro. Rentaro almost failed to catch it. It was a waist holster with two nylon straps. Kept inside was a gun and a knife.

This was what Rentaro had taken from the SAT member during the hotel battle.

The knife was a combat knife manufactured by Gerber Gear. As for the handgun—

"—A Beretta huh..."

Probably the SAT member's personal preference, this was a discontinued edition with the reinforced slide. Rentaro also recalled that Kisara's personal gun was a derivative edition of the Beretta 90two. Beretta products were both sturdy and aesthetically pleasing, a great match for the graceful Kisara, but Rentaro wondered if it would suit himself.

"Isn't that your gun?"

"It's the gun I stole while on the run. My XD is still at the police's evidence vault."

"The XD is cheap stuff. The Beretta is more accurate."

"You're relying on the sight system too much, right? Besides, my body is used to the XD already."

"Cheap guy."

"Damn it, I knew you were going to say that."

Just then, Rentaro suddenly recalled something else that was important.

"By the way, what type of Gastrea genes do you have as an Initiator?"

Hotaru angrily fell silent, throwing him a glance before saying:

"I am not obliged to tell you."

It looked like she was quite offended.

Rentaro was furiously checking whether the holster was tight enough when he heard "I'm not finished yet."

"What else do you want?"

Rentaro retorted impatiently as Hotaru pointed a finger straight at the tip of his nose.

"Stop addressing me as 'you' all the time. My name is Hotaru."

"...Got it, Hotaru."

"Then how should I address you?"

"Rentaro is fine."

"I see, then nice to meet you, Rentaro."

Hence, the two of them formed an alliance to unravel the truth.

They were not lifetime friends by any stretch, but to Rentaro, at least he now had a companion in this vast Tokyo Area. Most likely, it was the same for Hotaru too.

"What are you planning to do next?"

Rentaro looked around the room's interior while he answered:

"First let's start from here. Suibara's home might have some kind of evidence remaining that could be found if we're lucky. It could save a lot of work."

"This isn't Mr. Kihachi's home."

"What?"

"I said, this isn't Mr. Kihachi's home."

"Then where is this?"

Hotaru shook her head helplessly.

"Rentaro, haven't you realized by now? Having lost my Promoter, I should be taken back by the IISO."

"Oh!"

The inexplicable sense of dissonance stuck in the depths of his throat was finally made clear. At the same time when Rentaro's license was revoked, Enju was also taken away by IISO staff.

Naturally, after Suibara's death, Hotaru must be taken in the IISO's care after losing her partner.

"T-Then why?"

Rentaro blurted out as Hotaru pointed outside expressionlessly:

"Go outside. You'll understand."

The instant he went outdoors, Rentaro's eyes were instantly greeted by strong sunlight. The summer air previously disguised by the air conditioning struck him in the face, causing him to sweat profusely.

Every step he took caused frightening noises from the iron plates of the rusted staircase. Getting slightly away from the building, he observed the surroundings.

The tilted apartment building was a crude affair with a galvanized roof and wooden walls. The surrounding homes were similar. Most likely, even trash collection vehicles did not visit this zone. Abandoned construction materials and trash were left on the ground without getting collected. Many multicolored plastic bags of rubbish were lying at his feet.

The stench of rotting garbage was almost making Rentaro's nose go crooked.

Suddenly feeling someone's gaze, Rentaro looked back to see a man watching him with a sharp gaze turn around immediately and hide in his home. Judging from his facial features, that guy was not Japanese.

Since there was the noise of people living, it was reasonable to conclude that these buildings were inhabited. However, Rentaro could not understand why these buildings were neglected to the point of almost collapsing. These landlords were nothing respectable, apparently.

For an instant, he thought it might be an outskirt zone but turning his neck to check out the sky in 360 degrees, Rentaro saw that the Monoliths were very far away, hence this was probably part of the urban area.

"Why are you living in this kind of place?"

"Without a guarantor or guardian, I can only live in illegal places like this one. I ran away. Since the IISO were going to show up soon, I had no choice but to escape rapidly before they took me away."

Rentaro was once again amazed by her superior initiative. As soon as she learnt that Suibara was killed, she immediately thought about the next step without having any time for sorrow.

Enju was already quite mature for her age, but that was because by the young age of ten, she had already experienced the direct threats of cold and hunger as well as mental hazards such as persecution and discrimination.

It was true that misfortune and hardship would make people stronger, but speaking of which, Hotaru had keenly sensed the impending threat that even Enju was unable to notice, hurrying to escape before hand, hence, the hardships experienced by Hotaru must have been...

"Our original home is now guarded by the police."

"I see..."

Rentaro fell into deep thought.

"Should we risk entering in spite of that?"

"No, there's somewhere else we should go."

"Where?"

Gazing at Hotaru's face, Rentaro said:

"The crime scene where Suibara was murdered."

Part 2

Tadashima Shigetoku opened his notebook and stood still, thinking "come on, that's enough."

"But he didn't abandon me and even administered first aid to me, going as far as to order another person to carry me downstairs. I really don't think he's an evil criminal at all like what the news is reporting... Hey, are you listening?"

"Sigh..."

"Hold on, where was I? Right, right, let's start from when I was unwell due to my sleep medication and didn't hear the hotel's alarm in time to escape. Then—"

"—That's enough already."

Tadashima tried hard not to let impatience show on his face then closed his police notebook.

The slightly chubby woman sat up on the hospital bed, stroking her chin almost regrettably.

"Really? But I've only said about one third of what I wanted to say."

"Your testimony has a lot of value for reference, so we might trouble you again in the future, but for now, that's enough for today."

Tadashima bowed politely then left the sickroom.

"How was it, Section Chief?"

Waiting outside, Yoshikawa immediately asked.

Tadashima waved his hand in front of his face with an annoyed look.

"Nothing much, basically that type of person, you know? Probably because he saved her life, she is praising him with all her heart. Rather than a witness, she's more like a fan of the criminal. Is this what they call Stockholm syndrome?"

Yoshikawa laughed wryly.

"We're heading over to the station in a bit. Do you want to come with us, Section Chief?"

"No, Superintendent Hitsuma wants to see me. Looks like I'll have to partner with him as an two-man cell."

"Babysitting high-ranking officials is such a hassle."

Tadashima knocked Yoshikawa hard on the head.

"How many times have I told you not to badmouth people behind their backs? If you want to complain, do it to their face. Seriously... That guy is quite outstanding, sure, but somehow it bothers me."

Saying bye to Yoshikawa while he was stroking his head, Tadashima left the hospital. He called a taxi and went to the location specified by Hitsuma, a skyscraper that towered above all the surrounding buildings.

The whole building was black, making one suspect whether it was made of varanium. The entrance was even manned by guards with rifles.

In front of the building was a stone tablet carved with the words "Central Control Development Agency." Tadashima did not understand what kind of facility it was but it was probably the rumored "Black Building."

Tadashima read over Hitsuma's email and the attached map several times. Definitely this place.

He went over to inform the guard and showed his police badge. Probably because it was prearranged, he was easily let through.

In the elevator that rose with astounding speed, Tadashima almost lost his balance, but in the end, he still arrived at the sixty-fifth floor.

Then guided by a woman dressed in a white uniform, he passed through various security checkpoints with card keys and biometrics for verification.

Tadashima felt increasingly unsettled. Speaking of his attire, he was dressed in a crumpled suit due to spending nights at the as yet still undissolved investigation headquarters for convenience. His stubble was also too long since he had not shaved for a number of days.

Although he had no idea where he was being taken to, he hoped that there was no particular dress code.

In front of a room labeled "Control Room", the bulletproof glass opened up. The noise originally absorbed by the glass leaked slightly, allowing the footsteps of the people inside to be heard louder.

Tadashima was shocked.

The massive interior of the dark room was in a fan shape. The large number of holodisplays acted as illumination, showing rapidly changing numbers on indicator bars. This atmosphere was very similar to an air traffic control tower for monitoring aircraft movement, but here was a decisive difference. The giant holodisplay in the center was showing a map of the Tokyo Area, monitoring the city's electrical consumption strictly.

Tadashima felt as though he had been transported to the future and gasped.

"This place is...?"

"The so-called 'smart city concept.' Have you heard of it?"

Tadashima looked back in surprise. Hitsuma was dressed in a well-ironed suit, spreading his hands as he walked over.

Tadashima could only desperately spin his mind that was clearly overworked recently.

"I remember... In the past, it was proposed by the first Seitenshi, a city plan to make the supply of electrical power for efficient. That should be correct."

"Precisely. Electricity must be transmitted via high-voltage electric cables and there is severe waste in the process of delivering to ordinary homes. Apart from being difficult to store, the problem of loss is also very severe."

"For example, large-scale data centers would often require a large amount of electrical power on stand by in case the servers from overloading or there is a spike in data volume, thus using only 6% of the delivered electricity, reaching 12% at most. The rest is all wasted. The smart city concept's system is meant to monitor the usage of resources so as to transmit and portion out appropriate amounts of electrical power efficiently while avoiding blackouts and brownouts. After the Gastrea War, Tokyo's electricity shortage problem was very severe. You probably remember that very well."

Tadashima nodded silently then observed the smart city's core while his emotions resonated strongly.

"So it's finally completed. Since there hasn't be reports for a very long time, I almost thought..."

"Yes, because of the risk of this place being targeted for a terrorist attack, it was built as a nondescript building and given an ambiguous name to cover up."

Tadashima shrugged his head.

"Then why ask me over? It can't be for showing off to some like me who never uses computers apart from writing reports, right?"

After hearing the self-deprecating joke, Hitsuma smiled and maintained his cheerful demeanor.

"Naturally. To be honest, among the many functions of this control room, there is something like this."

Hitsuma snapped his fingers, separating the central panel into many smaller screens. Each of them showed camera images from downtown, cafes, shopping centers, etc.

Almost all images were taken from high above.

Tadashima's occupation immediately helped him to understand what was going on.

"These are security cameras..."

"Yes. Important facilities such as train stations and airports go without saying, but for early detection of Gastrea, the entire Tokyo Area is virtually covered with cameras."

Tadashima could not help but stare in amazement.

"How many security cameras are needed for the entire Tokyo Area? Even a thousand or two would be too few."

"Searching through them by human effort is impossible. Hence, by searching with the facial recognition program installed in the control room, you can achieve such a result."

Pulling a screen out from a corner of the the giant divided screen, he enlarged it to the size of the entire display.

Tadashima could not help but exclaim "Ah!" From a slightly high angle, the camera just happened to capture a young detective dressed in a gray suit, standing at a ramen vendor eating what appeared to be very tasty ramen.

Already on the job for three years yet still looking totally like noob no matter what, this face was recognized by Tadashima of course. Or rather, they had just parted ways earlier.

"It's Yoshikawa..."

"Indeed."

Looking back, Hitsuma nodded with a proud expression.

"Rentaro Satomi's facial characteristics have already been entered. The computer shall cast a wide net and all we need to do is wait for the prey to get snared automatically."

"I see. What amazing technology. But you can borrow this facility without orders from above? Does the investigation headquarters know about this?"

"No, actually. Only my father and I are privy to this. In other words, just the Superintendent-General and me."

Tadashima almost doubted his own ears. This guy was taking action on his own without even the investigation headquarters' knowledge?

He originally thought the police was a stricter organization with a well-defined hierarchy. It would not be a good thing for even the Superintendent-General's son to take this kind of overreaching action.

Tadashima felt quite uncomfortable inside.

Apparently, the Hitsuma father and son use "arresting the criminal" as a pretext to put in a lot of personal emotions in the matter of apprehending Rentaro.

"By the way, how's the investigation going? Inspector Tadashima."

A voice suddenly came from behind, interrupting Tadashima's thoughts.

Hiding somewhere earlier, a figure appeared from the depths of the dark room. It was a youth dressed in a standup collar uniform.

"I remember you were..."

"Yuuga Mitsugi. A CivSec you encountered by chance at the Plaza Hotel... Sorry for causing you guys trouble at the time."

Why was this boy here?

"H-Hey!"

Seeing Hitsuma grow frantic, Yuuga cast a calm gaze.

"There's no problem, right? Superintendent Hitsuma?"

The collected Hitsuma now looked very awkward, probably afraid that the boy might say something unnecessary. Were they well acquainted?

"By the way, Inspector, how goes the case?"

Tadashima felt a bit offended by this boy who seemed like a know-it-all.

"I am not obliged to share details with anyone unrelated to the investigation task."

"Inspector Tadashima, could you please tell him? This time, he is joining the investigation team as a civilian security officer."

It's not like it's a Gastrea crime, what does it have to do with the CivSecs—Thinking this, Tadashima could only open his notebook impatiently.

"I went to the hospital to question the woman who got caught in the battle between the fugitive and the SAT, as well as the injured SAT members. What's surprising is that the woman is very grateful to Rentaro Satomi for saving her and even said 'He's not the killer. There must be a mistake somewhere.' The SAT members were also very cheerful. Despite broken bones, they still smiled and expressed their wish to fight that guy again."

"Hahaha, what an incredible CivSec. Even as a fugitive, he's still make more fans while on the run."

Yuuga spoke with apparently joy. Tadashima threw him a sideways glance then turned to Hitsuma again.

"This is one point that I can't understand. He's a wanted murderer. To improve his chances of escaping, shouldn't he take the woman as a hostage instead?"

"Because the woman was shot, he probably decided she was not an appropriate hostage."

Hitsuma's attitude was quite indifferent.

"No, but even so, he still could have used another collapsed SAT member as a hostage. His method of taking out the SAT was also quite outrageous. Neutralizing all of them is even harder than simply killing six people. Don't you find it strange? This guy is clearly a fugitive and yet he prioritizes saving human lives. If he really was a killer who already killed one person, wouldn't he not hesitate to kill another?"

"He probably can't forget the fact that he's touted as the Hero of Tokyo Area? Even though there were no deaths among the SAT members, there's no guaranteed it was intentional. Or perhaps he was originally trying to kill them but it just so happened they all survived."

"So you're just trying to emphasis he's guilty."

"Speaking of which, Inspector Tadashima, do you believe he is innocent by any chance? The homicide case was investigated by none other than you, right?"

Tadashima reached to stroke his own head.

"I have nothing to say either about this point. However, I took a harsh and aggressive stance towards the suspect in the interrogation room. If you assume the suspect is innocent during interrogation, it's impossible to get any confession out."

Over on the side, Yuuga's shoulders shook while he laughed.

"Looks like Satomi's poisonous fangs have not been pulled out yet. He will surely take action. If a continued search of the river still comes up with nothing, it's very clear. Surely he must be alive. Fufu, Satomi. The game is just starting."

Tadashima glanced sideways at the unfathomable youth's smile, rubbing his arms due to a sense of chill.

Part 3

All the signals for the pedestrian scramble turned green at the intersection. Accompanied by a melody for assisting the blind, the pedestrians all began to cross.

On the asphalt which felt like a scorching pan with heat haze caused by the sun's radiation, people were walking rather lifelessly.

Rentaro Satomi quickly glanced at the geometric patterns traced out by the flood of crossing pedestrians.

Men in suits walking in a hurry, checking their watches from time to time. Couples leaning together, arm in arm. Housewives returning home from shopping. Youngsters walking with their heads down, staring at their cellphones.

Whenever any of these people looked at Rentaro unintentionally, he always felt so nervous that his back went numb.

"Look forward, Rentaro. Also, don't make any suspicious movements."

The voice came from beside him. Without looking at him, a girl with short brown hair was walking by his side, making a poker face that seemed completely uninterested in the world.

"As soon as I become aware of normally unintentional behavior, it gets very awkward."

"Looks like you've learned a certain principle. But people don't care about you as much as you think, so don't worry."

"Why do you always say such annoying things?"

"Haven't I succeeded in dispelling your tension?"

The girl spoke with an inorganic expression. Rentaro shut up.

However, she had a point. The world was always changing at all times. Three days had already passed since rumors of Rentaro's death.

'For the type creature known as the human, a little finger bumping into a table corner is a hundred times more important compared to news about the death of a great singer or politician.' Rentaro recalled Sumire saying that once.

Walking along the street, every pedestrian had their own life. There was probably no one who acted with their minds occupied twenty-four hours a day with Rentaro the stranger—Rentaro accepted that on a rational level and kept repeating it to himself.

However, might someone suddenly remember Rentaro's face and start yelling, charging to tackle him? Such terrifying imagined scenes kept lingering in his mind, making it hard for him to relax.

The two of them crossed the intersection somehow, making their way along the long shopping street.

Rentaro shook his head slowly.

Only after falling into this kind of isolated and helpless situation did he gradually start feeling how grateful he ought to be for all the people who had supported him visibly and invisibly in the past.

Without the trustworthy body temperature of the girl walking beside him, Rentaro very well might fear the gaze of others, completely unable to step outdoors.

To be honest, it was wonderful that the girl serving as his temporary partner was so cold and distant. The fact that she was only treating Rentaro as live bait to draw in the mechanized soldiers of the New World Creation Plan, Rentaro was not angry about that at all.

"We're there."

Rentaro tilted his head as the frame of the municipal office under construction stood before their eyes.

Construction was halted at the site while the erected scaffolding surrounded its exterior.

Was construction halted because it was a day off or due to the site becoming a murder scene? In any case, there was no one at the construction site. Trucks and excavators were motionless like some kind of strange avant-garde art display.

The midday sun was straight up. As soon as they thought of the unbearable heat causing their entire bodies to sweat, Rentaro and Hotaru hid under the building's shade. For some reason, there was more of a subtle, deathly silence here compared to out on the streets. Perhaps unique to places where people have died, this was a kind of sixth-sense warning that was difficult to explain through physical phenomena.

"Are you okay?"

"Don't worry about me."

Saying that, Hotaru walked ahead on her own. Rentaro felt a bit miffed. Did she really miss Suibara so much that she wanted to avenge him?

Despite sighing, he still followed Hotaru silently.

Evidence gathering at the scene seemed to have concluded. The blood stains and the chalk outlines originally used to mark locations had already been cleared, but as soon as Rentaro stepped into the scene, what happened that day replayed vividly in his vision.

He closed his eyes and mourned silently.

—Suibara, what exactly did you want to tell me back then?

He glanced to the side. Hotaru was standing there completely emotionlessly.

"Aren't you going to mourn silently?"

"At the instant of his passing, I had already used up a lifetime's worth of sorrow. I can't cry ever again."

"Really...?"

"So?"

Her brown hair swaying, Hotaru looked up skeptically to stare at Rentaro.

"Now that you're here, what do you plan on doing?"



Rentaro scratched the back of his head.

"Actually, I don't have any great ideas. But as the saying goes, you'll always find new clues the more you visit a scene. Besides, once I got here, many doubts are occurring to me."

Rentaro recalled the situation that night again.

"The body was still warm, meaning he was killed not too long ago. Then the police officers arrived at too opportune a timing. It's almost like someone deliberately alerted them while calculating the time of my arrival."

In other words, the culprit was still nearby—at least, capable of observing Rentaro's position.

Instantly hit by a doubt, Rentaro asked his companion whose emotions were unreadable.

"Hotaru, you said you started feeling a while ago that Suibara wasn't acting normal. More specifically, what was weird about his behavior?"

"He spent longer periods of time acting separately from me, often going off on his own somewhere. Although he made some awkward excuses, I concluded that men always had needs, so I didn't pry."

"He told me about wanting to see Her Highness Seitenshi, probably to expose some kind of conspiracy. I'm guessing it must be the New World Creation Plan and the Black Swan Project."

"If the New World Creation Plan is the upgraded version of the New Human Creation Plan, then what is the Black Swan Project?"

Rentaro shook his head.

"I have no idea either. But it feels like this matter might be possible to resolve if these can be cleared up."

Hotaru's question suddenly awakened Rentaro's memory of his conversation with Suibara.

'You want to expose a conspiracy? If you give me the evidence, I could help you hand it over.'

'Sorry, but the evidence was stolen.'

"Right, when I accepted Suibara's request, he said the enemy had stolen the evidence, which was why he wanted an audience with Her Highness Seitenshi or her aide—

—At this moment, an even louder voice was heard from the far side of his memories.

'I'm asking you because someone told me to. Where is the memory card Suibara gave you?'

"Oh."

Hotaru seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Rentaro. They exchanged a glance.

"Rentaro, didn't the assassin at the hotel ask you to hand over a memory card?"

Rentaro lowered his head slightly and pondered.

"That's quite weird... Judging from common sense, that memory card should have been the evidence that was stolen from Suibara."

"Hold on, what if it's like this? Mr. Kihachi said that the enemy organization stole the memory card but the enemy believes that the card is in your hands... In that case, who has the memory card now?"

The cicada's singing sounded especially loud while the shadows in the building changed subtly.

The sweat from all over the body and various other changes, everything was making Rentaro feel very uncomfortable.

Hotaru looked at him with eyes of suspicion.

"Rentaro, are you sure you didn't receive anything from Mr. Kihachi? Anything at all. Mr. Kihachi might have hidden it in something else that he gave you. Did you receive something from him?"

Rentaro shook his head firmly.

"Nothing at all."

"Really..."

"Then what about you? Did Suibara give anything to you for safekeeping?"

"I can't think of anything."

Back to square one.

However, Suibara's memory card must exist somewhere. This was the key to the incident. Rentaro decided to keep this firmly in a corner of his mind before changing the direction of his thoughts.

"Hotaru, I recalled something else after coming here. Do you have Suibara's cellphone?"

Leaning against a concrete pillar, Hotaru stared at Rentaro.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you the same question. I see... So you don't know either."

"So there are no clues on this either."

When under police interrogation, Rentaro was asked many times about the whereabouts of Suibara's cellphone. This was also indirect evidence that the police had not found Suibara's cellphone.

Smartphones had been in widespread use for more than two decades. With the increase in cellphone functionality, the concentration of personal private information had become even greater than before.

Once Suibara's cellphone was found, it was possible to gather important evidence such as Suibara's web history and phone record. From the police's standpoint, it was an absolutely essential target.

"So the enemy took Suibara's cellphone after killing him. Damn it, what thoroughness."

"It's too early to jump to that conclusion."

Hotaru operated her cellphone and placed it against her ear. She was probably trying to call Suibara's phone.

This ended up causing a faint ringtone to sound from somewhere. Rentaro immediately stared wide-eyed.

"Where's the cellphone?"

"Shush."

Hotaru pressed an index finger to her lips. A brief silence. Only the sound of cicadas, trucks driving along the main road as well as a faint ringtone that could be heard during brief openings, as quiet as a mosquito.

Tiptoeing to the edge of the half-built building with the wind against his cheeks, Rentaro could not help but feel dizzy. The sound seemed to coming from way down below.

Rentaro and Hotaru exchanged a glance then nodded before swiftly heading downstairs. The sound was coming from a corner of the construction site. Now the sound was clearer than before. Even Rentaro, who had no interest in pop music, could recognize it as a certain chart topping song after listening to part of the melody.

Narrowing down the source, the two of them pushed weeds apart and finally discovered a black smartphone vibrating face down.

Just as they picked it up to have a look, the vibrations stopped. Then the cellphone fell totally silent. Even holding down the power button did not produce any reaction.

This meant—

"Out of batteries. That was really close."

"Yeah..."

When Suibara was struck by the bullet, his cellphone must have fallen off the building by chance. Suppose he had thrown the cellphone deliberately in the emergency situation, that would have been amazing judgment.

—Suibara...

Sorrowfully, Rentaro flipped the cellphone face up. Part of the LCD was shattered as though someone had punched it hard.

Luckily, it was not entirely out of order. Left on standby until just now, there was only a bit of battery power remaining. For some reason, Rentaro had a feeling as though this was arranged by fate.

"Anyway, let's get it charged."

Dashing into a nearby net cafe to find an empty pair seat, Rentaro sat down on the hard chair and picked up the charging cord next to the computer and inserted it into the cellphone.

Then all he could do was wait with a praying mindset.

The cellphone vibrated on his palm. The screen showed remaining battery as 1%.

The two of them could not help but look at each other happily.

The screen was damaged, of course, but still barely readable.

Rentaro extended his index finger, preparing to operate the cellphone when he froze midair.

Even if Suibara was a deceased friend, was it really permissible for him to invade Suibara's privacy just to clear his own name?

Next, if Rentaro were to discover Suibara Kihachi's unmentionable private life, perhaps he would regret the invasion of privacy. Such delusions filled Rentaro's mind.

I don't care anymore—Rentaro began to slide his finger.

Then Rentaro and Hotaru spent their time on looking for possible clues.

The most anticipated inbox turned out to have nothing worth looking into. The photos in the phone were mostly that of people with half of them being Hotaru.

Seeing Suibara lavish Hotaru with affection, even using a photo of her as his cellphone background, Rentaro wondered "was this really okay?" Meanwhile, he was checking the photo albums when his gaze suddenly stopped on a certain photo.

It was probably taken during Christmas. The photo showed Suibara and Hotaru with Santa hats and a Christmas cake in the background. Since the photo was slanted at an angle from above, it was probably a selfie Suibara took by holding up the phone with his hand.

More amazing was the fact that Hotaru was smiling in the photo. Although it was not a wide grin, the corners of her lips were definitely raised gently. She was even making a victory sign with her hand towards the camera.

Rentaro found his peeking behavior very reprehensible and quickly switched to the next photo before Hotaru's emotions could be shaken.

After checking the photo folder, it was finally time for the call history. At last, something suspicious could be found here.

A contact named "Dr. Surumi" had called twice on the day that Suibara was killed and once the day before. Checking further back due to suspicions, Rentaro discovered that phone calls with this contact began a month earlier, roughly taking place twenty-five times.

"Hotaru, do you know who this person is?"

"Dr. Ayame Surumi. A forensic pathologist who performs Gastrea autopsies. Due to occupational demands, we visited Dr. Surumi's place many times to inquire about autopsy results."

"So it's someone in Doctor's field..."

"Doctor?"

"Oh nothing, I was just talking to myself. Then do you know why Suibara was contacting Dr. Surumi so frequently?"

Hotaru thought for a moment then shook her head.

"I don't know. Dr. Surumi and Mr. Kihachi probably had no private ties."

"Let's go ask directly. Perhaps this doctor might know about Suibara's matter."

"Dr. Surumi works at the university-affiliated hospital in the sixth ward."

Saying that, Hotaru got up from the seat. Looking at her from behind, Rentaro asked with curiosity.

"Uh, this doctor is a lady, right?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose this doctor has skin pale enough for veins to show, wears an overly long lab coat, treats the autopsy lab as a kitchen, has a normal body temperature of 32 degrees centigrade, and even expanded the basement in order to live with cadavers?"

Hotaru made a disgusted look.

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. I'm glad the answer is no."

"She didn't come to work? Why?"

"I'd like the answer to the same question too."

Receiving them was a fat doctor with a beer belly, a guy with an exhausted look on his face. Consequently, Rentaro had a preconceived notion that Dr. Surumi was very young despite the fact that she was not an intern.

"Calls aren't going through. This forces me to take her shifts. I'm totally worked to death."

This doctor's face seemed to be convulsing a little, his eyelids kept fluttering. It looked like he had accumulated too much pressure and fatigue.

Rentaro and Hotaru had entered the consultation room at Shidao University Hospital. They chanced upon someone whose work had just ended and also knew about what was going on, a doctor named Kakujou.

"Has the number of Gastrea increased recently?"

Rentaro asked bluntly but Dr. Kakujou did not take offense, simply nodded vigorously and spreading his hands.

"It's already gone beyond the level of relatively more. It's too anomalous. Rumors are flying about whether the Monolith No.32 that was rebuilt during the Third Kantō Battle might have problems."

Impossible. The reason why Monolith No.32 collapsed was due to a human disaster stemming from impurities mixed into the building materials to reduce varanium content.

Rentaro belonged to Tendo Civil Security which had confirmed that the newly built Monolith's varanium was 100% pure.

Speaking of which, Enju had mentioned that there was an increase in recent Gastrea cases.

Naturally, this was not limited to the jurisdiction covered by Rentaro's Tendo Civil Security. Where did such a great number of Gastrea enter from?

"Hey, let me confirm with you again. How many ways are there for Gastrea to invade the Tokyo Area?"

"Hmm, a very reasonable question. I don't know where I should start explaining from..."

The doctor's fat belly shook while he looked at the ceiling for an instant.

"First, there are three invasion vectors, primarily the air, the ground surface and underground. Although marine Gastrea can get in from the sea, they are unable to breathe on land, greatly reducing their menace. 200m below ground level or 5000m in the air, the energy of the varanium magnetic field begins to diminish. Hence, Gastrea capable of digging deeper than that or flying higher than that an invade. Oh right, wasn't there a great commotion about a very tenacious Gastrea that caught a rising air current to invade from high above? That's one of the cases I'm talking about."

It was probably the Morpho Butterfly Case. Recalling that, Rentaro only nodded ambiguously. If he answered too quickly, the doctor might suspect him of being a CivSec.

Sitting silently on a stool all along, Hotaru spoke for the first time.

"Then how do Gastrea enter on ground level?"

"From the gaps between the Monoliths."

Dr. Kakujou answered immediately.

"Gaps?"

"Yeah, aren't the Monoliths built at intervals of ten kilometers? Hence, the magnetic field is weakest at roughly five kilometers in the center. It feels like they target those spots to break through."

"Can they get through so easily?"

"No, they probably die nine times out of ten. And for that remaining one, the patrolling SDF will kill it after discovery. That's the usual situation. It's said that for Gastrea attempting to invade on the ground, only one out of a hundred can succeed. It's just that there are too many Gastrea at ground level. Besides, Gastrea have this inborn tendency to prioritize attacking humans so they never give up on invading the Tokyo Area no matter how many of them we kill. I guess it's inevitable? Based on the statistics, ground invasions of Gastrea are still the most common."

"So that's how it goes. I see now."

Dr. Kakujou muttered again:

"Think about it, you two. The SDF suffered a devastating blow in the Third Kantō Battle, while half of the Tokyo Area's CivSecs were killed. The remaining ones were cowards who either didn't participate in the Kantō Battle or ran off to other areas to hide. We're still managing, just barely, but sooner or later, there's gonna be a serious outbreak. Those of us in the medical scene are very afraid. Plus there's the news story about the Hero of Tokyo Area getting killed at the Plaza Hotel. Oh dear, speaking of which, your face does look quite similar—"

Rentaro was just about to explain in panic when a calm voice interrupted from the side.

"May I ask you more about my older sister? How long has she been absent from work?"

In order to get information out from the doctor without trouble, Hotaru had passed herself as Dr. Surumi's sister. Having forgotten what he was just about to say, Dr. Kakujou made a ponderous look and said:

"Four days already. Being absent like this for no reason is equivalent to automatic dismissal in this line of work. Although it's very harsh, that's a doctor's life."

"Did you call the police?"

"Police? Oh no, that's wrong."

Smiling, Kakujou answered Hotaru's question.

"The turnover rate in this job—Oh, that term might be too difficult for a little girl. Simply stated, many people end up quitting all of a sudden. Dr. Surumi has already endured for what can be considered a long time and I was thinking she could continue reliably."

Indeed, it was impossible for people with overly delicate nerves to dissect Gastrea with their bizarre appearances. Proud of her natural vocation, Sumire could be considered an exception amongst exceptions.

"Is it possible she went missing because she got caught in some kind of accident?"

"Hmm—How should I put this? It just never occurred to me, that's all."

Scratching his stubble hard, Dr. Kakujou replied. At this moment, he clapped his hands as though suddenly recalling something.

"Oh right, little girl, aren't you going to visit Dr. Surumi's home next?"

Hotaru made a disheartened look. It did not look like an act at all.

"Yes, but my older sister never told relatives her address. So—"

"Don't worry, it's okay, I'll tell you. I remember I asked for her address when forwarding mail from the university to her home."

Completely trusting Hotaru, Dr. Kakujou was very eager to help.

Even though he had doubts whether fabricating personal information in this manner was right, Rentaro never expected putting on a depressed look could win Dr. Kakujou's sympathy, so he did not dwell upon the matter.

Dr. Kakujou leaned forward from his chair and said with a serious look.

"Conversely, I have a favor to ask. Are you two willing to help me?"

"What favor?"

"Somehow, the electronic version of the Gastrea autopsy report that Dr. Surumi was in charge of a month ago had gone missing from the database. Before it disappeared, there was a record of her printing the data out, so I'm thinking she might have a backup on hand. I'm sorry, but regardless whether she's willing to continue working or not, after you find her, could you take that opportunity to bring back the autopsy report as well? After all, we are responsible for managing the information here."

Rentaro and Hotaru exchanged a glance. A month ago, wasn't that the same period as when Dr. Surumi and Suibara had started having frequent phone conversations?

"Got it."

Rentaro nodded cautiously.

After copying down Dr. Surumi's address from Dr. Kakujou and they were about to leave, Dr. Kakujou suddenly asked from behind:

"Hey, do you guys know what a 'black swan' is?"

Rentaro and Hotaru looked back at the same time.

"Where did you hear that from?"

Faced with Rentaro's worked up look, Dr. Kakujou reeled back from the question, almost falling off his chair.

"N-Nothing... I just recalled. Before Dr. Surumi started missing work, she kept muttering this term and seemed quite bothered by it. Rather than neurosis, it felt more like a ghastly aura. She even said..."

With a distraught look, Dr. Kakujou continued:

"The vineyard must be burnt down."

Shidao University Hospital's premises were very well kept and even had artificial turf and ponds. Probably to soothe the exhausted students who worked hard all the time. But in Rentaro's eyes, this scenery looked very stifling.

Walking next to him, Hotaru's steps were heavy too.

Dr. Surumi's link to Suibara was becoming increasingly likely, but there were new questions raised.

"What does the vineyard refer to?"

Hotaru seemed quite curious about this point of suspicion and took out a cellphone from her pocket. In order to let Rentaro see, she used the holodisplay, projecting the screen into the air then started searching.

Soon after, an English vocabulary site came up. "Vineyard"—because the pronunciation was so elegant, Rentaro originally thought it might be French or something, but it turned out to be an English word for grape plantation.

"Burn down the vineyard... What does that mean?"

"No idea at all."

"That guy also said that Dr. Surumi started acting strange a month ago."

Hotaru spoke in a monotonous voice. The pitiful little girl at the hospital earlier had disappeared without trace.

"Mr. Kihachi had acted like he was hiding things from me. On further thought, this also started a month ago."

A month ago again...

"What happened during that time?"

Rentaro wanted to calmly figure out what was the link here.

Suibara should not have any private interactions with Dr. Surumi, yet they spoke on the phone twenty-five times in one month. Both of them had started acting weird almost at the same time.

The late Suibara was a CivSec. Apart from Gastrea, was there anything else in common between a CivSec and a forensic pathologist?

"Hotaru, did anything involving Gastrea happen in the past month?"

"I remember we encountered a Gastrea together a month ago."

"What was the Gastrea like?"

Rentaro followed on the lead but Hotaru took a long time to respond. With a complicated look on her face, she said:

"Nothing special... Just an ordinary flying Gastrea. Stage II, transparent chest, ribs that inflated like a basket, very long nose. Disgusting."

"Defeated?"

"Mr. Kihachi was traveling along the highway. I leaned out from the front passenger seat and shot it down with a shotgun."

"Then what happened?"

"That's all."

"That can't be all, right?"

"But apart from that, there's nothing noteworthy at all. Although the defeated Gastrea was weird in outward appearance, every Gastrea, Stage II or above, looks weird. We simply handed the scene over to the police to handle then soon after we got home, a phone call came from somewhere, asking for Mr. Kihachi. After taking the call, he hurried and left. Now that I think about it, that was probably Dr. Surumi's call."

The incident was still in murky waters. Rentaro felt that the pieces of the puzzle were almost about to be fully gathered, but still had no idea how to put them together to make a correct picture.

However, the two of them at least understood that they had come across information that the enemy did not want to leak. It was foreseeable that the enemy was going to attack fiercely as soon as they discovered Rentaro and Hotaru.

Unfortunately, Hotaru knew nothing about Dr. Surumi's phone call. But had Hotaru known what Dr. Surumi had discovered, she probably might not be alive now. What a dilemma.

From the gap in the red brick wall surrounding Shidao University's campus, an intricately patterned cast iron front gate could be seen. This also announced the boundary of university-affiliated premises.

Rentaro suddenly realized that the main entrance might have security cameras installed that could monitor the coming and going of people from above.

He held his head down as much as possible when passing through but glancing sideways for an instant, he also noticed a camera pointed horizontally as well.

The instant he made eye contact with the slightly glowing lens in its spherical protective shell, Rentaro felt a chill along his spine.

Quickening his pace, he left the university.

"Target sighted!"

The operator suddenly yelled, raising tension in the control room.

"Where?"

Hitsuma asked, trying to contain his excited emotions. What answered him was the main holodisplay showing a certain gate.

"This place is?"

"The camera at the main entrance of the sixth ward's Shidao University Hospital."

Tadashima's mouth gaped open in surprise.

"No way... So instead of fleeing to the outskirt areas, this guy is walking around openly in urban areas?"

The operator's hands moved busily while the security camera highlighted the feature of note.

Unlike the coarse videos of ages past that could not be used as evidence in court, the image transmitted wirelessly to the server was extremely crisp, to the point that the viewer did not even need to squint.

On closer examination, just as a youth dressed in black clothing was about to leave the main entrance with his head bowed, he glanced at the camera momentarily. The facial recognition software had not missed this blink of an eye, immediately capturing it.

The operator stopped the scene in question, pulling out the facial zone for processing. That person was undoubtedly Rentaro Satomi.

Hitsuma looked around the control room for a certain face. Soon, he found it and walked over to Yuuga who had his hands in his pockets, making a face like he was humming a song.

"What is the meaning of this? Didn't you say your sniping shot definitely struck on target? He has recovered to the point of being able to walk."

Hitsuma was reprimanding him at a volume only audible to him, but Yuuga simply shrugged and replied:

"I didn't get the job done. But this is fine too. I have another chance to have fun."

"Fun? Did you say fun...?"

If the fact that the bastard had survived were to spread out, apart from the police getting mocked for incompetence, the Kisara who had finally accepted him would begin to harbor unnecessary hope.

Just as Hitsuma was about to act out in anger, Yuuga pointed his right hand at a spot on the display.

"Mr. Hitsuma, this girl should be Kihachi Suibara's Initiator, right?"

The image he was pointing to showed a short-haired girl standing quietly next to Rentaro. Having seen her face many times in various documents, he was absolutely certain.

"Hotaru Kouro...?"

Kihachi Suibara's Initiator. Nest had failed to locate the missing girl. No one expected to find her with Rentaro...

On the side, Tadashima saluted and said:

"I'm returning to headquarters to call for backup. Please direct us to where that guy is running off to, Superintendent Hitsuma."

Saying that, Tadashima hurried and left the control room.

Watching Tadashima leave, Hitsuma changed his expression as soon as he disappeared from view completely then took out his cellphone slowly to dial a number. Amidst the series of ringing, Hitsuma pondered.

Rentaro must not be handed over to the police. Although it was unclear how much he knew about the inside story, Rentaro was definitely a tricky fellow. It would be best not to assume that ordinary methods could take care of him. Hitsuma did not want another failure.

The other side picked up.

"Are you Nest? Can you cause traffic congestion? I hope that certain police vehicles can be blocked off. Also, that guy is still alive. Summon Hummingbird. This time he must be eliminated."

Hearing that, Yuuga's expression immediately stopped being so carefree.

"Hold on, Mr. Hitsuma, why Hummingbird? Rentaro Satomi is my prey. Allow me to sortie."

"The police has already seen your face."

"My required specs consisted of 'enough to defeat Rentaro Satomi instantaneously'! There is no one more suitable than me!"

"Hummingbird is enough."

"But—!"

"—Enough!"

Yuuga's mouth gaped open, still intending to protest, but in the end, he gnashed his teeth in chagrin and walked out of the control room.

Hitsuma snorted through his nose and stared at the magnified black-clad youth on the display once more.

Since the other side was attempting to destroy them by biting their throat—then let the dead tell no tales, according to the ancient adage.

Part 4

"This is the room. You can just leave the key at the caretaker's room to return it."

A pair of bony hands passed the key to Hotaru. Saying that, the building's caretaker impatiently adjusted his presbyopic glasses, turned around and left.

Rentaro recalled that caretakers were suppose to be present when someone apart from the tenant wanted to enter an apartment, in case of theft or loss.

Rentaro looked at the impostor little sister beside him.

As soon as the caretaker left, Hotaru immediately put away her smile and resumed her poker face.

Noticing his gaze, Hotaru looked up, her emotionless eyes gazing at him as though saying "Any objections?" Rentaro had no idea what to do with her.

"Night is coming soon. I hope we can get to the bottom of this today."

The yellow setting sun's rays were streaming in from the open window, producing mild heat on their backs. Finally, they were rid of the daytime's summer air.

Rentaro and Hotaru were at a corridor in a high-rise apartment.

He swiftly checked out the surroundings. The H-shaped corridor had two elevators and a set of emergency and normal stairs each. Furthermore, there was a gangway outside the building that could be lowered. After the Plaza Hotel siege, Rentaro had already acquired the habit of confirming his escape routes at any time.

Looking at the doorplate, he saw faded words reading "1203 Ayame Surumi."

Before visiting the caretaker's room, they had already pressed the doorbell many times, but this time, Rentaro still extended his finger while carrying a final shred of hope.

Ding dong—The doorbell rang emptily twice, but there was no response inside.

Looking at his feet, Rentaro found a disgusting dead cicada lying belly up at the door. A tasty feast, presumably. It was all covered by black ants.

"A recluse or she disappeared? In any case, let's hope there will be clues to the Black Swan."

"Recluse? Disappeared? Do you really think that it'll be so simple?"

"Huh?"

"Hotaru, have you seen a dead body before?"

Hotaru made a surprised look.

"I'll go in first."

Rentaro turned the key and pushed the door open slightly.

A blast of cold air escaped from inside. A chill brushed against Rentaro's neck. At the same time, there was a stench of decay mixed within it.

Pulling his waist holster so that he was in a position to fire any time, Rentaro quietly entered the apartment.

On the left after entering was the kitchen with a semicircular dining table. The vegetables on the counter had already rotted and shriveled up. A half-eaten cake was full of ants. She was probably preparing a meal at the time. The vegetables that were cut were soaking in a bowl with black mold growing all over the surface.

Rentaro had heard beforehand that this apartment was a two-room one-kitchen setup.

Raising his gun cautiously, Rentaro placed his hand on the sliding door further in and slowly pulled it.

Because the curtains were all drawn down, the interior was very dim.

The air conditioner was rumbling while expelling cold air. Inside the silent home, only that sound felt unusually noisy.

Despite being a woman's dwelling, the apartment was completely undecorated. The color was uniformly beige.

The bedroom that also served as the computer room did not have a single poster. A shelf only had an digital photoframe.

Finally arrived at the deepest room, Rentaro resolved himself to pull the door open.

The closet and dressing table were covered in a thin layer of dust. Occupying an entire wall, a book shelf was next to a large work desk.

There was no sign of a corpse anywhere. The smell of decay even lessened.

Speaking of which, the source of the stench was actually—

Hearing a gasp outside, Rentaro hurried back to the kitchen.

Hotaru's eyes were staring at a point, her entire body frozen like a statue. Ahead of her gaze was the bathroom door. Under the slightly ajar door, black blood was seeping out.

"Stand back."

Rentaro bit his lower lip, desperately stopping his voice from shaking while he spoke. Only then did he muster his courage and pushed the door open lightly.

The deceased's face was soaked in the almost overflowing bathtub with the dead body kneeling inside.

No clothing on the body. The skin was pale from all the blood draining out. The long hair was floating in the water like seaweed.

The water surface was black. The drain on the floor was clogged with coagulated blood. Three pieces of extracted fingernails had fallen on the floor.

Surely, she must be the tenant, Ayame Surumi.

She had apparently been tortured for information. Ending with only three fingernails extracted, she must have quickly disclosed what the interrogator wanted.

Rentaro swiftly examined her corpse before turning back to search through the drawers in the closet. Then he took a picnic sheet to cover the body.

Messing up the crime scene probably did not matter even though Rentaro and Hotaru's faces were witnessed when they were borrowing the key. An autopsy would reveal how long the deceased had died. Tracing back to the time of death, it would be clear that neither Rentaro nor Hotaru was the killer.

By the time he noticed, Hotaru was standing next to him.

He originally thought she had been stunned with fear, but turned out not to be the case at all.

"What a shame, we could have asked her many questions if she were still alive. Someone got to her first."

Rentaro could not help but feel stunned.

"A shame? Got to her first? Is that all you can say? Didn't you know each other?"

"So?"

Hotaru simply narrowed her eyes with displeasure. Rentaro clenched his fists in anger, slowly shaking his head.

"I really don't get you...!"

"You don't need to."

Saying that, she turned her back to him then looked slightly over towards him.

"If you insist, we can end our partnership here."

"Don't be silly."

"I see."

Saying that, Hotaru walked into the bathroom and began to examine the corpse.

"Due to the air conditioning running all this time, the rate of decay was slowed down."

Rentaro took deep breaths to calm his anger.

Hotaru was an important person involved in the incident. Staying with her would mean finding out the truth faster. There were no other drawbacks. Compared to acting alone, this was far more efficient.

Now was not the time for him to be picky.

—Even if his companion was someone whose personality he found impossible to respect.

On the other hand, Rentaro was also certain that the enemy would eliminate anyone who got near the truth. There was no question about that. Rentaro was still far from escaping from the proverbial tiger's mouth.

Presumably having understood the situation, Hotaru left. While watching her go out, Rentaro walked over to the western-style room.

As soon as he thought of how this was a place where someone had died, it was natural to think that he was disturbing the dead's peace.

Pulling the door open, he saw the shelf. Shown on the screen of the photoframe, with a university building in the background was probably a photo dating back to her days as a university student. Surumi had undoubtedly experienced happy times in the past. Every photo showed her smiling. Someone, possibly a boyfriend, also appeared many times.

Without warning, Dr. Kakujou's words surfaced in Rentaro's mind.

'Somehow, the electronic version of the Gastrea autopsy report that Dr. Surumi was in charge of a month ago had gone missing from the database. Before it disappeared, there was a record of her printing the data out, so I'm thinking she might have a backup on hand.'

The connection between Suibara and Dr. Surumi was the Gastrea. It would be very normal to conjecture that the autopsy report was involved in a hidden story.

Rentaro entered the adjacent room again, only noticing now that the desk's drawers were broken with signs of ransacking.

Rentaro could not help but click his tongue. A certain person had tortured and murdered Dr. Surumi, definitely for the purpose of finding out from her where the autopsy report had gone. Rentaro had no choice but to follow the enemy's footsteps. More and more, it dawned upon him that these people were not to be taken lightly.

Nevertheless, the enemy was not flawless. Unless he was a robot, it was hard to avoid human errors. Definitely, there definitely must be some kind of clue left behind.

With a praying mindset, Rentaro took out every book from the bookshelf and flipped the pages noisily.

He then discovered something in the gap between the desk's edge and the wall against it.

He carefully drew it out and patted the dust off its surface. A printed photo.

The instant he looked at the photo, Rentaro could not help but frown.

It was a photo during the Gastrea autopsy. The shot was taken of the dissected Gastrea abdomen. On an organ reminiscent of squid innards, covered with slime, a certain symbol was carved.

Rentaro stared intently and discovered it was a so-called pentagram, a "☆" in other words. Drawn at one of the five tips was a detailed and intricate feathered wing.

"Hotaru, come over here."

He called Hotaru over and showed her the result.

"Does this remind you of anything?"

"The Gastrea's claws can be seen in a corner of the photo... Its characteristics are quite similar to the aforementioned specimen defeated a month ago. However, this is my first time seeing this star-shaped symbol."

"I see..."

"Perhaps this might very well be what Dr. Kakujou was looking for?"

Despite their bizarre birth, the Gastrea were products of nature after all. Artificial symbols should not appear on their bodies.

Just as Rentaro was plunged into deep thought, a sudden frightening noise was heard, making him jump in surprise.

It was a telephone ringing. From the adjacent western room.

He first poked his head out before entering the room. Carefully standing before the sound's source, he confirmed that it really was an ordinary phone. Gradually replaced by cellphones and satellite phones, this was a landline whose market share was greatly diminished.

Exchanging a glance, Rentaro and Hotaru nodded. Then he pressed the receiver against his ear in trepidation.

'Is this Satomi?'

It was voice with countless overtones added. The range of overlapping pitches expanded beyond the frequencies that could be produced by a human. This was the product of a device that altered the voice to make it unrecognizable.

Rentaro stared at the receiver for quite a while.

"Who... are you?"

'An enemy is heading over to your side. Codename: Hummingbird. A soldier of the New World Creation Plan.'

"What are you talking about? Enemy? Hummingbird?"

'It's up to you whether you believe me or not. But you'll probably understand if it say it this way, won't you? The enemy is the killer of Kenji Houbara, formerly of the New Human Creation Plan.'

"What!?"

Although the news surpassed Rentaro's comprehension, at least he could understand this one fact. Neither lying nor playing a joke, the person on the other side of the line was sending a warning to Rentaro regarding an imminent crisis.

'Next, I'll tell you the enemy's ability. You should discuss countermeasures with the shorty beside you.'

Rentaro stayed silent to urge the caller to continue.

'Listen carefully, Hummingbird's ability is—'

The receiver gave the repeated tones of a dead line. The call was disconnected.

"Hey, what happened? Hello—"

"—Let me have that."

Reaching over, a hand snatched the phone from Rentaro.

After listening to the receiver for a while, Hotaru finally shook her head and replaced it.

"Even the hung up tone is gone. The line seems to be cut."

Hotaru searched inside her pocket. Taking out her cellphone, she showed the screen to Rentaro to show him the "no reception" indicator.

Rentaro could not help but shudder. Their cellphones were clearly working back when they first entered the apartment building.

With nothing to say each other, deafening silence filled the room.

"The enemy is already here. The apartment building is already invaded."

The fierce sound of the rotor slicing through air dominated the interior of the cabin.

Rika Kurumi opened the slide door as wind instantly blew against her entire body. The chilling wind was enough to blow away the straw hat she was wearing as well as make her one-piece dress flutter violently.

In the western sky, a yellow setting sun was half blocked by a Monolith. The brightness made her narrow her eyes.

This was 1000m in the air. She was in the cabin of a transport plane. Thanks to the sunny weather, there were no cumulus or nimbostratus clouds to get in the way. The scene below was as tiny as a model. Humans and cars could not be seen clearly. The smell of the sky was very fresh.

"Hummingbird—Moving out."

Rika stepped out of the cabin, then fell backwards with a jump.

Falling straight down head first, the girl was trailed by her long hair while tearing through the atmosphere at an astounding speed.

Rika began to countdown mentally after falling.

Knowing from experience when she had descended 500m, she rotated her body in the air, entering spreadeagle posture like a flying squirrel, then pulled hard on the harness to release the parachute on her back.

The ballistic parachute was deployed. Accompanied by an intense feeling of deceleration, the harness' tension made her entire body hurt.

But this state did not persist for long.

Opening her eyes, she looked down, her feet yet to touch the ground. Her body was descending slowly in the air. Looking up, she saw the completely open square parachute bathed under the setting sun's rays, dyed red.

Looking down at the cityscape below, she waved her right hand vigorously.

With that, out of the countless number of rooftops, one of them emitted a "TARGET" light spot as a marker. At the same time, the horizontal and vertical distances were also projected onto her view.

The special contact lenses equipped before the airdrop were outfitted with augmented reality (AR) functions, allowing additional images to be projected onto the retina, adding to real vision.

Rika controlled the harness while cautiously fine-tuning the parachute's angle and direction of descent.

Soon, the target apartment building rooftop became nearer and nearer. Her feet stepped onto the red circle indicated by AR.

No matter how many times she had jumped in the past, she always leaned forward due to the sudden heavy impact experienced by her waist. Then the entire parachute covered Rika's entire body.

Releasing the harness' belt, she abandoned the parachute. Putting on the straw hat clamped between the harness and her dress, she hugged her favorite teddy bear.

Patting the dust on her skirt's hem, she picked up the cellphone from her spandex sock and dialed the predetermined number.

"Hummingbird reporting. Successfully arrived at target destination."

'I copy that. Now transmitting target's face.'

Then the received file was shown by holodisplay. Two face photos: one was a youth older than her and the other was a girl younger than her. They were "Rentaro Satomi" and "Hotaru Kouro" respectively.

"Hold on, Nest. Aren't the missions coming too frequently lately? I just killed a weird man earlier. The interval between kills is too short."

Rika grumbled with a young girl's shrill voice but the person on the other end replied without hesitation.

'This is a mission. Don't grumble. Just as you demanded, the apartment building only has thirty minutes of electronic isolation. If you miss this window of opportunity, those two are going to escape again.'

Rika could not help but click her tongue. Changing her mood, she pointed at Rentaro's photo. Spontaneously, she laughed with pity.

"This is the target that Darkstalker failed to take out? How shameful."

'That Darkstalker has a message for you: "Don't underestimate Rentaro Satomi, or else you might end up suffering."'

Rika snorted derisively.

"Is he a moron? Or is that an excuse for failure? Shameful... Whatever. I will finish this quick and return."

At this moment, two small parachutes descended on the apartment building's roof after Rika.

They looked like tires at first glance. Similar to flying saucers in size, but of course, they were not purely tires.

Chips were implanted in Rika's brain, allowing her to move objects through a mental link—In other words, what was known as a brain machine interface (BMI).

These tires were precisely the controlled by Kurumi Rika's thought driven interface—

"Necropolis Strider—Awaken, my lovely familiars."

With a clap of her hand, the intricate driving mechanism activated. The tires stood up as though they had their own will and began to circle around Rika.

Examining the apartment building's structural diagram, she located the switchboard and the telephone line behind it. She also decided to disable the alarm as well.

"Right, first I have to prevent people from interfering—
Offensive Enchant: *Thorns*."

With a "putz" kind of sound, giant blades emerged from all over the tires.

The two tires were instantly transformed into lethal weapons covered with sharp protrusions, shredding the floor while rolling in Rika's surroundings.

Rika slowly reached for the roof door and unleashed the Wanderers.

"Go!"

With her voice as the signal, the shockwave engines installed in the Wanderers began to roar, rushing forward with ferocious speed. Striking the metal roof door, the "thorns" portions sliced through gaps in the door's weak points like a chainsaw.

With a thunderous, weird noise and sparks, the door's latch was sliced together with the bolt. Unable to resist this power, the metal door fell down inwards.

Without any emotional response at all, the Wanderers continued to be driven by the shockwave engines, bouncing randomly like pinballs between the floor, the ceilings and the walls, meanwhile making turns as they rushed down the staircase. The violent paths they took along their rampage left behind trails of deep devastation.

Very quickly, the sounds of screams and ruptured bags of warm blood could be heard downstairs.

Before killing Rentaro Satomi and Hotaru Kouro, the Wanderers could not possibly be stopped. Whenever Rika activated her ability, all living, breathing organisms were slaughtered without exception. This was where the "Necropolis Strider" moniker came from.

Soon after, her brain received news that Unit 1 had severed the target telephone line.

To prevent people from escaping, Unit 2 was guarding the front entrance.

"Over the rainbow♪"

Lost in the music of slaughter, Rika hugged her teddy bear tightly while humming a fairy tale-style song as she descended the stairs.

With external communications cut off, Rentaro and Hotaru were forced to discuss their next plan.

"This is bad. Judging from the phone call, the enemy has already discovered your presence."

Although Hotaru was pretending to contemplate calmly, the raging adrenalin in her body was conveying the zeal of revenge.

An excellent chance had finally arrived. I never knew that chance to swing the hammer of justice would arrive so quickly.

Drawing the two standard-issue sidearms from the holster at her lower back, Hotaru closed her eyes and sought salvation from the cold tactile feeling of steel, meanwhile releasing the safeties with her thumbs.

—Mr. Kihachi, please lend me your strength.

"I think it's better if we focus on escaping this building."

"No, the enemy must be taken down. Finally, I can avenge Mr. Kihachi."

"Don't strain yourself. Apart from not knowing the enemy's true identity, we don't even know what abilities they possess. This can be fatal."

Hotaru glared sideways at Rentaro. This weak style of thinking was what costed Mr. Kihachi his life, probably.

"Didn't I mention this? I am simply working with you in the hopes that your fresh blood will lure plenty of enemies for me to hunt. As bait, you are very successful. Although I'm slightly sorry to say this, your sense of camaraderie is but an illusion. I actually hate you very much."

"Now's not the time to be saying this kind of stuff. The enemy probably put you on their hit list too. If we start infighting here, it'll only help the enemy. We'll lose even if it was originally possible to win the battle."

Rentaro extended his hand to her.

"Let's cooperate, Hotaru. Since the enemy cut all electrical communications to prevent us from calling for help, in the worst case scenario, they might be planning to kill every resident inside the entire building. First let's allow the innocent residents to escape—"

Smack. A dry sound was heard. Rentaro's extended hand of alliance was swatted away by Hotaru with extreme calmness.

"If you want to save other people's lives, why didn't you save Mr. Kihachi in the first place?"

Rentaro instantly made a shocked face in response.

"Rentaro, are you really the CivSec hero who rallied and united morale during the Third Kantō Battle to defeat Aldebaran? It doesn't look like it to me."

"...You're wrong, Hotaru. I'm a high school student, an employee of Tendo Civil Security. Apart from that, I'm Enju's legal guardian as well. I'm not some kind of hero or savior."

Rentaro looked straight at Hotaru and continued:

"The deceased does not hope for you to avenge him at all."

"No matter what you say, I will hunt the enemy. I don't need your help. Goodbye."

"Hotaru!"

She made her way to the front door, turning her back to Rentaro as he tried to chase her.

Entering the public corridor, Hotaru reached behind her to shut the door, drawing a deep breath forcefully.

Silently, she accumulated energy in the depths of her abdomen. Her limbs gradually warmed up and there was a feeling like her five senses were expanding. Hotaru released her power.

She quietly opened her eyes. He was wrong. She was fine alone. All she needed to do was defeat the enemy singlehandedly.

Looking at the H-shaped corridor, she checked that there was nothing unusual. Apart from the telephone line, the electrical power supply was normal.

At this moment, screams and the sounds of something sliced apart could be heard upstairs.

Rushing up the emergency staircase two or three steps at a time, she arrived at the thirteenth floor. A strong smell of blood greeted her.

The thirteenth floor exhibited piles of dead bodies and rivers of blood. People with brains and shoulders sliced open were sprawled in the corridor while crimson blood was silently spreading across the linoleum floor. Numerous marks of damage were left on the walls and ceilings as though chopped by a giant's blade.

Kneeling down, Hotaru examined a nearby woman's corpse.

The cut seemed to be sawn through by a thick blade.

Going closer to inspect, she found that some of the corpses had severed limbs and necks while others were dismembered. Surely these people must have gone through hellish pain.

Assuredly, the residents in the apartment building opened their doors to check after hearing the screaming and the rumbling noise, turning into sacrifices one after another. Carefully examining one of the two elevators, Hotaru found it stuck due to a corpse preventing the doors from closing. The elevator doors were opening and closing meaninglessly while the corpse's position was shifted every time.

Just as Rentaro suggested, the enemy was showing no restraint at all. Would she be able to defeat an enemy who was morally bankrupt to such a thorough extent?

The light sound of vehicle exhaust made her look back, only to see something on top of another corpse in the corridor.

She was first struck by an illusion of seeing a leopard feeding on a corpse, but soon realized it was a small tire the size of a flying saucer. That thing had teeth-like blades poking out all over. Since the tire was not deflated, that probably meant that it was filled with something like hardened resin instead of air.

Two exhaust pipes made rumbling noise while the spiked tire kept shredding the corpse with its saw teeth.

Hotaru instinctively knew. Although she did not understand how it worked, she knew this was the killer that was slaughtering the residents in the apartment building.

So that was Hummingbird?

Hotaru instantly shook her head. That was not a human at all.

Noticing her presence, the massacring machine began to shift its location.

By the time she realized something was wrong, it was already too late. Driven by the combustion of fossil fuels, the engine gave a distinctly different roar then made for her in a beeline.

Seeing the saw teeth approach with astounding speed, Hotaru frantically crossed her guns to defend. The tire happened to strike them exactly, hence the strong impact pushed her backwards a long distance. Continuing to spin, the tire produced red-hot sparks with large noise against where it was leaning.

Hotaru gnashed her teeth and pushed back with an Initiator's arm strength.

Having created distance between them, she aimed the muzzles and swiftly pulled the triggers of her dual guns.

The result made Hotaru speechless.

The machine moved in a zigzag, easily evading the .45 rounds while bouncing up from the floor and stabbing into the walls to advance. Not only that, but while traversing the walls, it would gradually approach the ceiling, leaving a trail of destruction while advancing in a suspended manner, approaching Hotaru's head.

Having lost aim, Hotaru instantly jumped to the side. The floor at her original position was instantly shredded by the massacring machine.

Even knowing she might be injured as result, she still issued a kick. A blade stabbed into her knee. Despite gritting her teeth, she still could not help but groan.

However, the damage to the enemy was also significant. Suffering a full-powered kick from an Initiator, the tire struck a wall violently, embedding itself there with a great noise, finally falling to the ground. Refusing to stop, it was still convulsing.

Hotaru jumped up on one leg while her right leg's injury finished regenerating in midair. Then she viciously stomped the wheel portion from the side with both feet.

Stepping on it, she raised her two guns and shot from point blank range. Apart from the sound of gunshots and the blinding muzzle flash, she could feel the recoil attacking both her arms while shells danced against the walls and the floor.

The tire shattered and the shockwave engine fused to it was also destroyed by the .45 bullets.

Both guns reached a state of slide stop, hold open at the same time. All her bullets had been shot.

An instant of silence. The pungent smell of gunpowder. Hotaru felt that something sounded very noisy but it turned out to be the intense panting coming from her own throat.

She used her arm to wipe the sweat of her brow. The mysterious machine was completely silent.

It looked like she had won. If possible, she hoped that this was the only enemy.

"Save me!"

A sudden shrill scream made her look back to see a girl running towards her.

Hotaru had just expressed to Rentaro that she was uninterested in saving survivors, but she could not help but feel relief to see someone still alive in this tragic state of affairs.

The girl threw herself against Hotaru's bosom.

Hearing a plunging sound accompanied by an impact piercing her body, Hotaru could not help but convulse.

"Huh?"

Hotaru looked down in trepidation at her own chest.

The girl, wearing a straw hat and holding a teddy bear, had taken out the knife hidden in the stuffed toy. As for the tip of the knife—

The straw hat wearing girl brought her lips lightly to Hotaru's ear.

"Dum~my."

"A-Ah..."

The blade easily passed through the tank top, piercing Hotaru's left lung. Buried in her body, more than half of the knife's blade was black. It was undoubtedly made of varanium, capable of inhibiting regeneration.



"How is it? How does it feel? Do you see it? What's the feeling like when you're about to die?"

"N-No way..."

She never expected this girl to be—

"Farewell, lovely princess."

Drawing out the knife, the girl aimed her next strike at the heart.

Shaking as though her entire body was getting electrocuted, Hotaru's muscles went tense as she coughed blood violently. The girl jumped lightly back to evade.

View shaking, Hotaru fell onto her knees. Her extremities were getting cold. She looked up at the enemy with blurry vision. The girl in the one-piece dress was looking down at her with a smile.

The ground was right before her eyes. Hotaru's consciousness dissolved before she struck the hard linoleum floor, thus expiring.

Picking up an arm of Hotaru who was collapsed at her feet, the girl confirmed that the pulse had stopped. Just to be safe, she observed for pupil responses. As for the heartbeat, listening for it was probably not necessary.

The foolish corpse felt extremely funny. Stepping on Hotaru's dead body, Rika ground her shoe's sole against her.

"One more~ person left~♪"

Turning around to go downstairs, Rika went to hunt down the last remaining enemy.

Part 5

Rentaro pressed the intercom doorbell and stuck his foot out the instant the door opened to block it, extending his handgun at the same time.

"Come out. Slowly."

Pointed by a gun without warning, the old man in a bathrobe originally had a laid back look but due to missing his chance to scream, had no choice but to obediently exit.

"W-Who are you?"

Finally asking a question, the old man was ignored by Rentaro. Making the old man turn around and grabbing the back of the bathrobe, he pushed the old man into the elevator. Inside were ten inhabitants of the twelfth floor whom Rentaro had gathered in the same manner.

"Is it money? Is money your goal?" "What was that strange noise earlier? Gunshots? What is going on here?"

"—No time to explain. You'll be going to the ground floor. After leaving the building, call for help immediately."

Since a while ago, gunshots and the sound of fighting could be heard upstairs. The enemy was on the thirteenth floor. Escaping downwards should not run into the enemy.

Thinking that, Rentaro pressed the ground floor button and stepped away from the floor display panel. But just at that moment, a thought of doubt suddenly surfaced in his mind, giving him a very ominous feeling.

The enemy had destroyed the phone line to cut off communications. The switchboard and other wires were probably on the ground floor and basement. It was hard to imagine those things being located on the thirteenth floor.

In other words, the enemy cutting the phone line and the enemy fighting Hotaru were different people. There were multiple attackers.

Just as the elevator doors were about to close, Rentaro reached out to stop the elevator.

"Hold on, I'm coming down after all."

The twelfth floor residents showed looks of despair. Damn it, I'm protecting you guys.

This time, the doors ought to close without problems but then there was a cry of "Wait up, save me." Rentaro hastily opened the door, only to see an approaching thirteen or fourteen-year-old long-haired girl wearing a straw hat and hugging a teddy bear.

"There's a tire monster upstairs. So many people died!"

"Tire monster? R-Right, did you see a girl roughly this tall?"

Rentaro raised his palm to chest level, indicating Hotaru's height. The girl hugged the teddy bear slightly tighter then shook her head.

"I see..."

The gunshots and sounds of battle had ended. Rentaro did not know if Hotaru had won or lost. He hoped she was safe.

Judging from the panel showing the floors, this apartment building apparently had fifteen floors above ground and two levels underground.

Probably hearing the girl's terrifying description altered their understanding of the situation, despite feeling curious, the people in the elevator still remained subtly quiet.

With that, the doors closed successfully at last. Rentaro pressed the ground floor button.

The descending elevator produced a slight sense of floating. The numbers on the floor display panel blinked one by one and went down.

Everyone held bated breaths without saying a word. The air was filled with the stench of sweat while Rentaro tasted bitter saliva in his mouth. This heavy silence was not purely because the elevator was packed tight like a can of sardines.

The elevator suddenly stopped and the lights went out. Gray delusions expanded endlessly in Rentaro's mind and all he could do about his sweating hands was wipe them on his pants.

Luckily, Rentaro's imagination did not materialize and the elevator reached the ground floor safely, arriving with ding.

Suddenly, an inexplicable sense of chill rushed through Rentaro's entire body.

—At this moment, a loud crash happened, enough to dent the elevator doors, suddenly shaking the elevator. Giant blades stabbed through the gap in the doors, rotating at the same time in a shower of sparks. Even after Rentaro pressed the close button, the door was still forced open.

"Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Elevator was filled with destructive panic as Rentaro was squeezed into the middle.

There was no time to think.

Aiming accurately at the blade that was trying to dig open the metal doors, Rentaro curled up his right sleeve to expose his prosthetic arm. Lowering his body's center of gravity, he prepared to strike back.

Timing just as the door opened, he mobilized his artificial arm.

While striking, a spent shell was spiraled out into the air.

"—Tiger Prevails Over Heaven."

Propelled by powerful thrust, his arm kept swinging. The mysterious spinning object competed violently against the unparalleled hard fist of metal while an irritating sense of numbness passed onto Rentaro's body through the artificial Ikimb.

However, the contest of strength did not persist for long. Capable of sending even a small bus flying, Rentaro's fist was gradually overpowering the slashing attack from the enemy's chainsaw or something.

Sent flying, the mysterious enemy bounced on the floor, finally striking the other side of the wall violently.

"That was...?"

At this moment, Rentaro only captured the enemy's appearance for the first time in his view. A tire monster, that was the only description as the weapon's engine revved up.

An unmanned drone... Or perhaps—

The bizarre voice on the telephone at Dr. Surumi's home was replayed in his mind—

'An enemy is heading over to your side. Codename: Hummingbird. A soldier of the New World Creation Plan.'

If this was the ability belonging to the Hummingbird mentioned by the caller, Rentaro also knew someone else with a similar ability.

Tina Sprout.

She was a user of what was called a Brain Machine Interface (BMI), using brain signals to control mechanical devices. This was reportedly a practical technique developed by a genius scientist called Ayn Rand who used to be Sumire's colleague.

First to be encountered was Yuuga Mitsugi, also named Darkstalker, who possessed the same ability as the supertechnology that Sumire had completed obsessively, the Model 21 Varanium Eye Model.

Who on earth was replicating these technologies and upgrading them? Who was the mastermind behind the New World Creation Plan...?

While Rentaro was wondering that, the tire monster got up again.

Rentaro immediately pulled out the Beretta from his holster and fired a double tap. Amazingly, the enemy evaded in a zigzag path.

Rentaro switched his aim away from the BMI terminal and shot again. This time, he targeted the fire extinguisher stuck in the wall next to the enemy. Using varanium bullets, known for their hardness, he smashed the glass case and dented the fire extinguisher's aluminum exterior.

Then he continued to pull the trigger in succession. The extinguishing agent spilled out and struck directly, unable to evade the shockwave of the explosion, the tire monster was blown away.

Rentaro would not be Rentaro if he chose this moment to escape.

"Hahhhhhhhhhh!"

Closing in, he aimed at the tire's center and unleashed a punch towards the engine that was fused with the wheel.

"Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 12—"

The cartridge in his artificial arm was ignited. The smell of gunpowder irritated his nasal cavity. The tire also shook from fear but it was already too late.

"—Flash Aerial Ripple."

The entire floor was shaken violently. With its engine shattered, the tire fell into the floor with a loud crash.

Swung from a state of adhesion, the punch's power made the enemy silent. The faintly flashing mechanical signals were interrupted. Having lost its power source, it could no longer activate.

After confirming that the opponent was not going to move again, Rentaro released his taut tension and exhaled.

Leaving the BMI terminal alone would only lead to a great disaster. There was nothing more important than smash every enemy terminal he came across. It was during the battle against Tina when Rentaro had learnt this painful lesson.

As the billowing smoke and the extinguishing agent gradually dispersed, Rentaro checked out the ground floor but frowned.

The first residents to realize something was wrong and attempt to escape all seemed to have collapsed on the floor, turned into food for the BMI terminal and heart wrenchingly dismembered corpses scattered across the walls and floor.

Never did he expect the New World Creation Plan to have such unrestrained people...

Recalling his mission, Rentaro looked back to the elevator and beckoned amidst the fire extinguisher's white smoke.

"It's okay now."

The people inside stepped out in terror. The old man in the bathrobe asked on behalf of everyone.

"W-What is going on? What on earth—"

Rentaro shook his head.

"I don't know either, but the front entrance should be safe to pass now. Hurry up, escape and call the police."

"You are?"

"Before the police arrive, I need to help more residents escape."

This was foolhardy but Rentaro had no choice. Since even the alarm was cut, all he could do was repeatedly escort residents out of the building by using the elevator before the police arrived.

Because he was a wanted fugitive, it was still unclear whether he would be able to escape successfully after the police arrived in full force, but Rentaro could not ignore the terrifying scene of massacre here. Besides, the whole reason why this became a battlefield was due to Rentaro visiting Dr. Surumi's residence in the first place.

Watching all the residents of the twelfth floor leave through the main entrance, Rentaro turned around.

Just at this moment, he noticed someone still in the elevator.

It was the girl who was hugging the teddy bear.

Rentaro waved his hand impatiently.

"You too, go escape. Do you want to die?"

The girl made a cute smile and looked at him.

"I'll help too. Two people are more efficient than one, right?"

Not expecting such a suggestion, Rentaro was taken by surprise.

Even someone who had been trained regularly would not jump out to help others so easily when faced with a sudden life threatening situation, unless they had a particularly strong sense of mission.

A man chased by a lion would have no luxury of tending to other fleeing companions. This was the truth.

But this young girl...?

Rather than touched, Rentaro first felt suspicious.

The girl tilted her head cutely and smiled.

"Hurry up and get to work, Big Brother. If you dally here, the tire monster will continue to rampage, right? With two of us working together, efficiency will double."

She was completely correct.

Rentaro closed his eye, took a deep breath then slowly opened them.

"I get it. Then I'll let you help me. I'm going to take the elevator to the eleventh floor. You take the tenth."

Saying that, he entered the elevator and pressed the close button.

It was then that Rentaro smelled a sweet fragrance. Perfume? He had not noticed when packed inside the elevator, but it looked like it was coming from the girl.

Rentaro's brain seemed to want to say something.

Right. He remembered it was in the basement lab when he heard Sumire explain about the deaths of Kenji Houbara, Saya Takamura and Giichi Ebihara.

'Honestly, I am quite concerned about this incident, which is why I have asked Miori to help gather information. Kenji Houbara was killed in the theater without eyewitnesses. The knife used for murder also had no fingerprints, but a faint sweet fragrance was apparently lingering on the murder weapon.'

—A sweet fragrance?

Rentaro could not help but feel his hair stand on end in terror.

Suppose the tire monster was a BMI terminal like Tina's "Shenfield" then naturally, the person responsible for controlling it must be hiding somewhere. If the apartment building was already invaded by that Hummingbird, where could the enemy be?

Clong—The elevator doors made a slight sound and gradually closed.

His heart beating rapidly, Rentaro felt chest pains, wanting to vomit.

Confirming the handgun's position at his waist, his palm was sticky with cold sweat.

Sneaking a glance at the girl standing beside him in the elevator, Rentaro could not see her face due to the straw hat. The girl was hugging the teddy bear in her left arm while her right hand was inserted into the stuffed toy's belly.

On closer examination, the teddy bear's belly was bulging abnormally, clearly stuffed with something apart from cotton.

A red alert sounded in his mind.

The elevator doors closed completely. The girl began to move. Rentaro took action at the same time.

With lightning speed, he drew his gun and aimed.

But by the time he realized, a black muzzle was occupying his view. At the same time, he found the girl's gun pointing at his head.

The girl looked over and made a savage grin.

"Aha~~? Big Brother, how did you suddenly figure it out? It's the first time my initial strike was seen through. Super refreshing."

"You're Hummingbird?"

"Yes. I am the second assassin."

Rentaro was filled with chagrin. What a great idiot he was. Why did he fail to notice until the assassin got this?

"I tricked you earlier, Big Brother."

After a while, Hummingbird revealed a malicious grin and said:

"Hotaru Kouro's body must be cold and stiff by now."

A surge of anger instantly rose from the tip of Rentaro's feet right up to his head.

While pulling the trigger with his index finger, Rentaro pushed his head hard to the side and dropped down, avoiding the enemy's muzzle. Like a mirror reflection, the enemy made the same move.

Two deafening shots rang out. The muzzle flash exploded before Rentaro eyes, the impact and the heat wave making him narrow his eyes while the supersonic bullet flew past his ear. At the same time, the noise explosion struck him.

The shots bounced around as ricochets in the elevator. Was this the devil's coincidence? Both sides were unharmed.

In any case, Rentaro decided he had to neutralize the enemy's gun. Brushing the girl's slender arm aside, he mercilessly attacked the back of her hand using his artificial arm's elbow. The girl groaned in pain and dropped the gun but in the next instant, she gave off insane laughter.

What was with this girl?

Hummingbird lowered her stance and aimed a kick at Rentaro's vital spot. Scared of a direct impact there, Rentaro swiftly used his gun wielding artificial hand to perform a grappling move towards the underarm. Then he felt intense pain as though his artificial muscles were about to be torn.

Severing the pain nerves a moment too slow, he also dropped his gun slightly later.

The enemy was pressing her weight over, causing his back to strike the wall of the narrow elevator hard, squeezing air forcefully out of his lungs. Due to his back pushing against the floor indicator panel, the elevator began to rise after some slight shaking.

Rentaro was breaking out in cold sweat. Despite using as much strength he could muster, that monstrous strength which totally did not belong to a girl was not budging at all.

In a frenzy, he delivered three knees into the enemy's abdomen three times. Aiming for the moment when the enemy's grip loosened, he escaped and moved along the elevator to circle behind his opponent.

However, his brain gave a warning signal while instinct compelled him to raise his chin. Targeting his eyes, Hummingbird's fingers just flew past his eyes. Without even the time to feel lucky, the pain from being struck in the left calf made him cry out.

Originally intending to wreck the opponent's eyes in an upper attack, it was skillfully changed to a low kick.

Hummingbird took out a dagger from the fallen teddy bear, raising it to chest height then charged with her entire body. Because space was too tight here, there was no place to flee at all.

With an electronic "ding!" the elevator doors opened behind him. The elevator had reached the fifth floor.

A move to make a comeback surfaced in Rentaro's mind. Without even time to think he grabbed the enemy's shoulders and used the momentum of the charging, knife-wielding girl to jump backwards, then using his own body as a fulcrum, he then leaned back to throw his opponent backwards—A sacrificial judo technique known as "tomoenage" involving an overhead throw or suplex.

With a face full of surprise, unable to react at all, the girl spun in the air. In her confusion, she must have no idea what was going on.

Thrown out of the elevator using her own momentum, the girl's petite body struck the wall in the elevator lobby of the fifth floor.

Although this was an excellent opportunity for a follow up attack, the dull pain in his leg from the low kick he suffered earlier made Rentaro watch with open eyes as he missed his chance.

Flying to her feet, Hummingbird flipped her skirt up and quickly drew out the backup gun from her thigh holster. Just as Rentaro frantically hid in the elevator, the ensuing intense noise and sparks made him cower.

He pressed the "close" button. Soon the doors closed and he pressed the ground floor. The elevator began to descend.

Back leaning against the elevator wall that was scarred with bullet holes, Rentaro forced himself not to collapse.

All the joints in his body were aching and the bandages originally used to wrap his old wound had ruptured.

Although he had been able to distance himself from the enemy for now, the threat was still close by.

He racked his brain as hard as could. What to do? What should he do?

The light in the ceiling flashed momentarily while the elevator shook. Rentaro wondered if it was an epicentral earthquake and hastily leaned against a wall for support to avoid falling down.

Something had fallen on top of the elevator, what was it? Naturally, it must be Hummingbird in pursuit from the fifth floor. Then Rentaro hit the floor and picked up the Beretta he had dropped along with the enemy's lost weapon, thus wielding dual pistols as he pulled the triggers, firing away at the ceiling.

The enemy also fired from above the ceiling, guided by instinct. The ricochet shattered the floor display panel and the ceiling lights. Glass fell from above like a shower. Rentaro fearlessly returned fire in a frenzy. The randomly flying bullets played a symphony of war while shells fell scattered over the floor. Grazes on his face felt painful. There was even one ricocheted bullet that struck Rentaro's knee, burying itself into the bone, scorching the inside of his body.

By the time Rentaro emptied both guns, the enemy was also out of ammunition.

A deafening silence descended, enough to pierce the ears with pain. Rentaro's nasal cavity was filled with the irritating and strong smell of gunpowder.

What was the current situation?

After a while, he heard something collapse on the ceiling.

At some point in time, the elevator had stopped as a result of their actions. A ricochet had apparently damaged the control panel, causing the elevator to stop operating. With only a blinking light remaining on the ceiling, all the others were extinguished. The entire space was very dark.

Rentaro leaned against a wall for support, getting up gingerly. Then he pulled down the hole-ridden ceiling.

Collapsed on the ceiling, Hummingbird instantly fell down, groaning as she smashed into the elevator floor.

Two shots in the gut, one in the chest, the 9mm bullets had dyed her one-piece dress crimson. Her chest was heaving up and down violently. Hummingbird could no longer fight anymore.

Gazing at the ceiling, the girl murmured with an expression of disbelief.

"No way... M-Must be a lie, right? Created to surpass the New Human Creation Project... How could I, have lost..."

Rentaro stared down silently at the girl for quite a while.

"...I have many things to ask you. If you give up on resisting, I'll give you treatment."

Hummingbird twisted her face in self mockery, while the pain her chest made her cough violently. Blood flew around. The corner of her lip was also bleeding.

"What a fool. Stop joking around."

Feebly, she retorted while patting herself with a trembling hand on her heart's location.

"My heartbeat... is monitored. If anyone finds out, I was saved by you... No matter what, I will be erased... No place for refuge. I, even if, I die... Nothing more than, swapping a brain. Comrades will, kill... you. End result is, the same."

Lying face up towards the ceiling, she continued in the same tone of resignation.

"The ending... was just as, what Darkstalker said... exactly."

"What did you say?"

"Only Darkstalker... in the organization, viewed you, as credible threat... high regard. He said you're... combat genius. Also, he wants to, fight you, again. So he had a row with, higher-ups... Apparently."

"....."

Rentaro was quite surprised to find out that the flippant Yuuga actually praised him that much.

Yuuga Mitsugi was really the strongest enemy at hand...

At this time, he noticed Hummingbird's hem had hiked up, exposing a pale white thigh.

Rentaro could not help but stare, dumbfounded. To think that there was a star-shaped tattoo on her thigh. Drawn on two of the five tips was a complicated feathered wing each. The same. It was the same as the symbol carved on the Gastrea internal organ in the photo.

"Hey, what's this? What does the pentagram represent?"

Rentaro hurriedly inquired but Hummingbird simply grinned and laughed.

"My, teddy... Inside, see for yourself."

Despite his suspicions, Rentaro still did as told silently. The muffler wearing white bear's belly was bulging. Inside was probably stuffed with weapons or the like.

Reaching in there, he tried to pull out the contents but could not due to the size. The white bear's raised fur felt nice to touch but the object inside was quite large and felt quite hard.

What was it?

Impatient, Rentaro simply destroyed the stuffed toy's top half. With cotton flying out, the contents were exposed. Seeing what was inside, Rentaro could not help but gasp.

The bear's belly was a tangle of plasticine and wires. Installed in the center was a cheap digital counter. Thirty seconds happened to remain on the countdown. As soon as he realized that this was a timed plastic explosive, Rentaro felt his blood run cold.

Hummingbird smiled painfully.

"My... heartbeat, once it weakens, bomb automatically starts, activating. Elevator stopped, injured leg, you trying to run... impossible. Now it, counts as... a draw."

"Damn it!"

Rentaro rushed to elevator doors, trying to open them but the doors did not even budge.

While minding his leg, he carefully tried to jump onto the ceiling but the left leg transmitted sharp pain where he had been struck by the bullet.

There was only twenty seconds left on the countdown.

Suddenly, there was a great noise accompanied by intense up and down shaking of his view, causing him to lose balance. This time, Rentaro realized much quicker than something else had landed on top of the elevator.

From the gaps in the ruptured ceiling, he saw.

Rentaro and Hummingbird both stared wide-eyed. Especially Hummingbird who yelled awkwardly.

"Didn't you die already—"

She was answered by a bullet. Accompanied by a crisp gunshot, Hummingbird's head spurted blood and collapsed limply against the wall.

"Farewell, lovely princess."

An icy voice came from the ceiling.

"Hotaru!"

The figure above was very slender. It was Hotaru Kouro, whose eyes looked like they were frozen.

"You... Hummingbird said you were dead..."

Then shaking his head, deciding it was not time to be discussing that, Rentaro looked at the timer again.

Seven seconds left.

"Hotaru! There's a bomb here."

"Give me your hand!"

Rentaro extended his arm and was pulled up by a force that almost dislocated his shoulder, taking his entire person to the elevator shaft above the ceiling boards.

His view was instantly dark. He could hear the sound of cables rumbling softly somewhere, echoing against his eardrums.

"Grab the steel cables!"

He did as told. Four seconds left.

Hotaru fired her gun repeatedly, destroying all of the emergency braking devices keeping the elevator stationary.

—Three seconds.

Then drawing a knife, she used her Initiator's arm strength to instantly sever the three other cables apart from the one Rentaro was holding onto.

——Two seconds.

Holding tightly to the remaining steel cable with her left hand as a safety rope, she simultaneously lifted her leg then stomped hard on the elevator below.

————One second.

Exceeding the weight limit, the elevator finally separated from the cabling, crashing down the elevator shaft as fast as a meteor.

Meanwhile, the cable Rentaro and Hotaru were holding onto was pulled up, accompanied by a sense of rapid ascent.

Rentaro and Hotaru desperately clung onto the cable that was almost about to break into pieces. As Rentaro stared downwards, the elevator fell with sparks from the guide rails while the counterweight dropped with a rumbling sound of friction.

Then—the bomb finally exploded.

The scorching shockwave came from below, making it hard for Rentaro to keep his eyes open. His view shook violently. Suspended in midair, clinging to a cable, Rentaro and Hotaru were like a small boat getting ravaged by a storm.

Then after the shockwave, a blazing inferno and astounding noises of burning rushed up the elevator shaft.

The red tongues of flame closed in on Rentaro and Hotaru's feet. Luckily, they halted once they reached that height and no more.

The pillar of fire made a seemingly living reaction akin to tongue clicking and reluctantly shrank back down the elevator shaft.

Rentaro and Hotaru both breathed out in relief at the same time.

Staring into each other's eyes up close unintentionally, Rentaro found that Hotaru's eyes were widened with surprise, looking extremely cute.

But for some reason, Hotaru seemed to find it very embarrassing for her facial expression to be seen by others, hence she averted her gaze. "Let's go up." Saying that, she pulled Rentaro's arm and slowly climbed the cable.

Finally, they reached the elevator maintenance room on the fifteenth floor.

The setting sun outside was giving off intense red light, compelling one to cover one's face. It happened to be dusk now.

With both of them bathed under the rays of the setting sun, only then did Rentaro notice that Hotaru's tank top was torn, stained with blood even redder than the setting sun.

"You were stabbed by a knife?"

"The wound is already healed."

"Healed..."

No matter what, it looked like a stab to the heart but the wound's traces were very faint.

No—Rentaro shook his head. Before dying, Hummingbird had said: "Didn't you die already—" ...A top assassin like her should not have been deceived by a feigned death.

"Hotaru, what kind of Initiator are you exactly with what Gastrea genes mixed in?"

Hotaru kept silent for a long time, gazing at Rentaro, before finally deciding not to hide it any further. Reluctantly, she nodded slightly and murmured:

"A type of flatworm named *Dugesia japonica*."

"*Dugesia japonica*..."

Of course, Rentaro knew that the type of creature classified as planarians possessed exceptional powers of regeneration. A small animal that could endure long periods of starvation. They were quite famous as an example of regeneration where two halves of a laterally bisected body each grew back into complete organisms. According to literature, they were frequently used for regeneration experiments.

"So your ability is—"

"Simply stated, it's *enhanced regeneration*. Even after receiving damage that would cause instant death to an ordinary Initiator, I can still heal my wounds and resurrect. This type of powerful regeneration can even overcome the inhibitive effects of varanium."

Rentaro was once again awed by the wonders of life and could not help but sigh emotionally.

In the past, Rentaro had personally witnessed two instances of what could be called super regeneration. The first was none other than himself. During the battle against Kagetane Hiruko, he had injected the AGV Experimental Drug and barely managed to pull through fatal injuries. However, that drug was said to have an extremely high chance of causing a human to turn into a Gastrea, 20%, which was an exceptionally dangerous side effect akin to playing Russian roulette. It was almost a miracle that Rentaro had not turned into Gastrea after injecting all five syringes. However, that thing did not actually count as something practical.

The second case was the terrifying enemy boss Aldebaran during the Third Kantō Battle, a memory still vivid in his mind. It too had a similar ability.

Using the massive firepower of the EP bomb developed by the Shiba Heavy Industries, they only barely managed to blow Aldebaran up, leaving no trace behind. What a terrifying and intense battle.

"Why do you have to hide such a powerful ability?"

Hotaru shook her head helplessly.

"It's not as all-powerful as you think. A human's structure is far more complex than a planarian's. Hence, there are limitations to regeneration. For example, if gasoline was splashed during the death process and lit on fire, or the head was separated from the body, regeneration is not possible. Also whenever on the verge of death, I am at the mercy of the enemy no matter what they do with my body. Hence, the opponent must not be allowed to know my ability and there are many difficulties in using it. As for why I kept it secret from you, that's because I feared I would be put at risk if you disclosed my ability after getting tortured."

I see, that makes sense. In a battle between Initiators, depending on the types of abilities, a one-hit kill was definitely possible. If the enemy was well-informed, coming up with countermeasures before hand would be possible, hence Initiator abilities were top secret as a matter of principle, forbidden from being leaked.

"I get it now. I thought it was because you hated me."

"Of course, that was one of the reasons."

"..."

"What's the matter?"

Rentaro scratched his head hard for a change of mood then took off his uniform jacket and tossed it to Hotaru.

"Here, put this on. Your clothing is all covered in blood. You'll scare people to death if you walk outside like that."

Hotaru brought Rentaro's jacket to her nose and sniffed, her expression tensing up.

"So smelly, a man's sweat is so smelly..."

"Then give it back."

"But by this point, it can't be helped. I'll just have to make do."

Rentaro clicked his tongue and turned around. This girl was such a pain.

"T-Thank you."

"What—?"

"Nothing. Let's go, Rentaro."

Probably due to being under the setting sun, her face was slightly red as she frantically turned away. While Hotaru started walking on her own, Rentaro yelled "Hold on" from behind, causing her to look back.

Silently, Rentaro pointed at his left leg where a bullet had struck.

"Lend me your shoulder."

Hotaru stared at him silently for a long time before finally walking over to support him without saying a word. No matter how much shame Rentaro felt inside, he still accepted the girl's help. Despite her cold eyes and attitude, for some reason, he could feel through body contact that the girl's body temperature felt was as scorching as a fire.

The two of them had no intention of taking the elevator. Walking down the stairs, they reached the main entrance.

The front of the building was packed with crowds. The police arriving would just be a matter of time.

Unsure whether a pedestrian might remember his face, Rentaro kept his head low and feigned nonchalance while walking with Hotaru pulling him. With eyes lowered, Hotaru spotted a taxi with her sharp eyesight and stopped it, hopping on, giving the address of the apartment that served as her hiding place.

The middle-aged driver glanced at Rentaro and Hotaru's tragic appearance, showing a surprised look for an instant but he quickly suppressed the wavering in his heart using his professionalism as a long-time driver, slowly turning the steering wheel to drive.

Police sirens were heard from a distance as a large number of police cars soon arrived in a hurry with lights flashing.

Before passing by the police cars, Rentaro and Hotaru hastily lowered their heads below the windows to hide, probably due to the Doppler effect, the police sirens sounded quite off-key and comical.

Looking up in trepidation, Rentaro peered back through the rear window to see the police cars surrounding the apartment building they had been at just earlier. That was so close.

Rentaro felt his entire body drained due to a relaxing of tension. Just at that moment, he met gazes with the driver through the rear view mirror.

The driver was indeed making an "oh I see" expression then averting his gaze as though he had accidentally glimpsed intimacy between a man and a woman.

This inexplicable reaction made the hairs on the back of Rentaro's neck stand on end violently.

The driver's expression was the reaction when reality just happened to match a fuzzy memory. Apart from that, the driver had shifted his eyes away, aware of his dangerous situation.

What exactly was he thinking? Naturally, he must have discovered that the passenger's face was identical to the fugitive in the news.

Otherwise, why would he make such an uncomfortable look after seeing Rentaro's face?

When Hotaru got on the taxi, she had given their hiding place's address without hesitation.

It would be too optimistic to assume that the driver would not fulfill his civic duties by reporting to the police after the two of them got off.

No, perhaps the driver was only pretending to be driving towards the destination but in fact, was heading to a police station. If that was true, it really would be the end.

Encountering a red light, the car stopped quietly. Probably feeling the tension in the air, Hotaru silently observed the situation's development.

The driver also sensed his thoughts getting figured out by the passengers. The tension reached saturation as though it would explode with a light touch.

The traffic signal finally turned green. The driver stepped on the gas. Inertia pulled the passenger's weight back on the seats slightly.

"Excuse me, sir..."

Rentaro shuddered, his entire body tensing up as though he had heard a death sentence. The driver continued:

"Could you listen to me rambling to myself for a bit? Although I'm currently in this job, a month ago, I was still trying to enlist in the SDF despite my age. Uh... You know how during the Third Kantō Battle, volunteer standards for the SDF were greatly relaxed, right? Back then, I was thinking I should give up my driving job to protect the Tokyo Area, so picking up a gun was the correct choice..."

Saying that, the driver suddenly paused. "And then?" asked Rentaro calmly.

Gripping the steering wheel so hard that it creaked, the driver continued sadly.

"In the end, it was no good. Too terrifying. I lost my wife and children during the war ten years ago and I originally thought I had nothing more to lose, but as fate would have it, I remarried again with widow who had experienced the same. Although our lives are very plain and modest, we live each day very happily... Hence, I was unable to resolve myself to accept the possibility of losing everything again. If I really had to die, it'd better to die together with her."

"...That's a natural reaction. You don't need to beat yourself up over it."

The taxi entered a tunnel. Inside the tunnel, there were regularly spaced orange lights for illumination. Every time they passed one of them, it lit up the side of the driver's face faintly.

"Mr. CivSec, how is your family?"

Judging from his tone of voice, the driver no longer doubted Rentaro's identity as a CivSec. Rentaro was thinking how to make up a story to satisfy the driver's expectations but could only shake his head. If he made stuff up now, it would only leave an unpleasant impression on the other guy.

"They all died."

"Weren't you afraid when taking on Aldebaran?"

"Very afraid."

Hotaru looked over at him with slightly ajar lips.

"It's best not to experience something like that. After all, compared to the effort put in, you just end up receiving insignificant thanks."

"Then why?"

Rentaro thought for a while before shaking his head again.

"I don't know. At the time, I was the only one capable of doing it, that's why I..."

"I see..."

Then they all fell silent. Feeling unsettled, Rentaro wondered if he had disappointed the driver. Sitting uncomfortably, he twisted his waist to adjust his sitting posture. However, he finally blurted out a comment that was not a doubt.

"Perhaps that's always the case with so-called heroes."

The driver smiled at the rear view mirror.

"Please rest assured. Recently, my memory has become very poor. After sending you to your destination, I will completely forget whom I ever took as passengers."

"Really...? Uh thanks. That's a great help."

Not knowing what to say next, Rentaro fell silent. The other side did not continue to ask questions. There was a faint feeling that a warm atmosphere was flowing inside the car.

Rentaro closed his eyes.

He was neither a hero nor a savior. This perception of himself had not changed at all. However, if his actions could bring some contribution to the smiles and happiness of others, then perhaps his journey might have some meaning.

The situation had not improved at all.

Enju was still under the IISO's management. Tina was locked away in a detention facility. Kisara was even being deceived by Hitsuma and exploited.

As soon as he thought of how Hitsuma was betraying Kisara's trust, Rentaro felt his rage rising. However, he could not rush into the MPD and shoot Hitsuma. That would only add to his crimes. Right now, all he could hope for is while investigating the Suibara case, he would come across evidence that would reveal Hitsuma's true colors, thereby making a comeback to reverse the situation.

He had successfully defeated Hummingbird. She was undoubtedly the killer who had assassinated Kenji Houbara. Judging from the sniping method during the Plaza Hotel siege, the one who had killed Giichi Ebihara was probably Darkstalker.

By the process of elimination, this left an unknown person as Saya Takamura's murderer.

There were two more assassins. In fact, Rentaro believed that Darkstalker was still the one to watch out for the most.

After the battle with Hummingbird, Rentaro realized that though she was a formidable foe, it was not to the point that the impossibility of winning brought despair. But that guy...

Yuuga Mitsugi. Sooner or later, Rentaro must fight him to show who would come out on top.

The blazing fury in his abdomen heated up his entire body. Facing the interior of the car, Rentaro glared at the enemy who was located somewhere in this vast Tokyo Area.

Part 6

Slam! The noise echoed throughout the control room, making the operator's shoulders shake in fright.

Ignoring the pain in his fist, Hitsuma hammered the control panel hard. His proper-looking face was twisted, his eyebrows tilted in rage. He was gripping his cellphone so forcefully that it creaked.

"I know. Report again if there are any new developments."

Forcing these words out, he hung up directly then quickened his pace to leave the control room.

He punched the vending machine in the hallway with his shaking fist.

"Damn it... Damn it! Impossible. How could Hummingbird get taken out?"

"Oh my, Mr. Hitsuma, now where does the problem of responsibility lie?"

Hitsuma stared furiously at the voice's source. Completely unafraid, Yuuga shrugged with an expression of joy.

"So like I said, you should have sent me from the start. Hummingbird's ability is not enough."

"Could you have predicted Hummingbird's defeat? Her mission accomplishment rate has been 100% in the past."

"It's a joke if killing small fries count as a 100% mission accomplishment rate. Her level only amounts to this much, right?"

Clearly a colleague was killed but Yuuga's response was more than aloof, to the point of being cold.

"Rentaro Satomi... I underestimated him too much."

"Now you understand, right, Mr. Hitsuma? So next time—"

"—No, it's not your turn yet! There's Swordtail! Next time will be serious, I absolutely won't have mercy on him! He will be exterminated for sure!"

Yuuga's expression cooled down momentarily as he exhaled through his nose.

"Sure, whatever you say. By the way, hasn't Inspector Tadashima been looking for you since a while ago?"

Hearing that, Hitsuma stood up straight and looked at his watch to check the time.

With Hummingbird defeated, right now, it was a difficult task to keep calm in front of that guy. Apart from that, if he continued to waste time here, it could cause unnecessary misunderstandings.

"I'm leaving this place to you."

As he brushed past, Yuuga said in a more serious voice than ever before.

"Mr. Hitsuma, that inspector's brain is very sharp. It's best not to lower your guard."

"You mean Tadashima?"

Hitsuma shook his head in disagreement.

"Not a problem. He's someone who's about to retire and waiting for his pension. He definitely doesn't want to meddle in unnecessary business. It's also impossible for him to figure out the truth. That's precisely why I chose him as a partner."

"I hope so. At least, don't mess up from carelessness."

The wind blew with the smell of defeat.

Driving his favorite car, Hitsuma gripped the steering wheel in a frenzy, flooring the gas pedal as though he had forgotten his own profession, even exceeding the highway's speed limit.

While pressing the horn, he passed a number of vehicles in succession. His idle left foot was tapping impatiently.

Even Darkstalker, lower in rank than him, was showing an attitude of derision. If sending out Swordtail failed to clean up this mess, the organization might demand Hitsuma to bear responsibility.

"Damn that Rentaro Satomi...!"

His heart was filled with irrepressible emotion. If Tadashima met him in this state, he would probably notice that something was amiss.

At this moment, Hitsuma suddenly thought of a place to visit along the way to relieve his stress.

Calculating the needed time, he decided it was within acceptable range, hence he turned the steering wheel and got off the highway.

After taking many turns in narrow streets to enter the entertainment district, he stopped the car in front of a filthy building.

Up the stairs was Hitsuma's target, a doorplate reading "Tendo Civil Security Company."

He used the previously prepared backup key to open the door silently. Streaming in from the window, the setting sun's rays made the entire office feel like it had been set on fire.

Behind the massive CEO desk of ebony in the deepest part of the office, Kisara Tendo was sitting with her back to Hitsuma.

Hitsuma tiptoed over to her back and quietly hugged her from behind, wrapping his arms around her neck.

"Kisara, I came to see you."

She seemed to notice his presence only after he spoke. The girl clad entirely in black slowly looked up at Hitsuma.

Her eyes were glazed over like glass beads that had lost their luster. Although she was looking at him, nothing reflected in her eyes.

"Oh... Mr. Hitsuma."

Completely opposite to her usual look of joy, Kisara answered in a sluggish voice.

"What are you looking at, Kisara?"

Searching for Kisara's gaze, a smile surfaced on Hitsuma's face.

"Oh, it has already been delivered."

The soft chiffon drape was very pretty while the skirt billowed out in multiple layers. From the chest to the skirt, the design was pure white as an ode to maidenly purity. The mannequin's head was covered with a see through veil that draped down to the shoulders.

This was undoubtedly the wedding dress that Hitsuma had given as a present with no expenses spared.

Ever since Kisara received the news of Rentaro's death at the Plaza Hotel siege, she had been like this.

Although it seemed quite similar to marriage blues, for Hitsuma, this made things even more convenient.

He had already investigated beforehand that Rentaro Satomi had feelings for this woman.

All other women were easily obtained by Hitsuma. But only getting his hands on this woman would be meaningful.

Once that guy was dead and Hitsuma married this woman, only then would his revenge finally be complete.

"Let's hurry and hold the wedding, Kisara."

Approaching her with a twisted smile, Hitsuma combed his fingers through her beautiful silken hair while she allowed him to do as he pleased.



Author's Notes

A story's blueprint is called the "plot" and writers rely on it to weave a story.

Taking myself as an example, I first go "I want to write this kind of scene!" then I think about "How exactly should the story go to develop into that direction?" through a process of reverse thinking (also known as the induction method) to conceptualize. Conversely, reversing the steps results in what's called the deduction method, but why do I find it impossible to write using the deduction method? If I try to write a story using it, I inevitably end up getting stuck somewhere. Although this is my flaw as a writer, it's not a totally bad thing. The inductive method is very logical so as long as things are arranged sufficiently cleanly, the story will have unity in logic.

As for the drawbacks to this method, it's that once the setting gets complicated, there will be endless details to arrange beforehand, causing the content to become overloaded. (In my case, I wish to make the text as beautiful and as easy to read as possible for readers, which is one of the reasons causing my writing speed to be extremely slow.)

Then about this series, although I had a foreboding feeling that I'd spent countless hours thinking up details that end up overloading the plot and getting thrown into the trash, I never expected it would take me so long to finish writing...

That's why this series suffers from obstructed labor so much, but in the end, it still reached the step of getting released. Sorry for making everybody wait.

If readers could all enjoy this book, nothing else would please me more.

This time, still looking after me so much is the editor in charge, Mr. Kurosaki with many hidden talents, who was apparently an opera writer in the past, as well as Saki Ukai the illustrator who was smiling with embarrassment during an autograph event when many fans expressed "I've always thought you were a man," plus all the other editors and everyone else involved with this book, I offer you all my thanks.

Finally, there are the readers. Using the sweet bait of "lolis, lolis here~~" and "boobs, boobs here~~" like a peepshow to entice the readers, then turning the page to show disgusting scenes like heads falling suddenly to the ground or disemboweled guts, known for underhanded marketing methods rare in recent times, the worst writer in all of history—me, Shiden Kanzaki—still energetically aiming for renewing the record for being the worst. I hope the next volume will be released for sale earlier. Detailed dates will be announced on the Dengeki Bunko official site as well as my Twitter, so you should be able to get the latest news by checking online.

I am truly grateful to you for picking up this book.

I wish for God's blessings to all the dear readers of my work.

Shiden Kanzaki